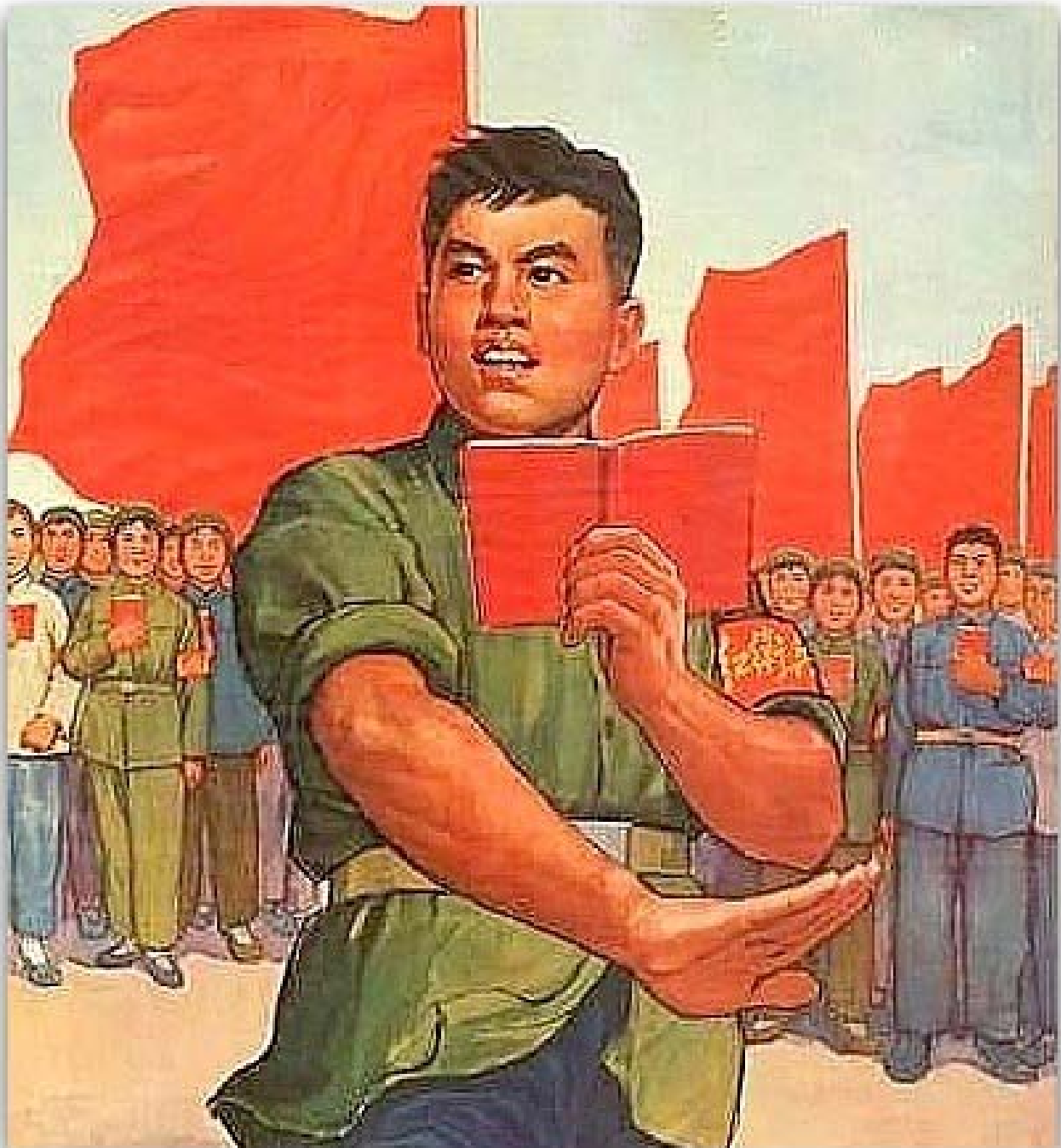


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Constructive Criticism: A Handbook



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Introduction

I have a vivid memory of the time I first got an inkling of what constructive criticism is and why it's so important. News of the Cambodian Invasion had just hit St. Louis, and I had hurried to a big anti-war meeting on campus, determined to do whatever I could to help stop the new military offensive. I left the meeting three hours later unnerved and downhearted. The display of sexism and class bias in the room had been monumental. Of maybe 40 people who spoke, only two were women, and I got the impression that *they* were listened to only because of their personal relationships with a couple of the male leaders. A few of the men confidently flexed their intellectual muscles before the crowd, using sarcasm and non-stop rhetoric to bludgeon other people into accepting their ideas. Ironically, these men were able to play such an elitist role precisely because of the anti-leadership tendencies in the room. Since there was no structured presentation of the issues - '*We don't need a lecture*', the line ran, '*we need some participation*' - only those who already had a grasp of the information could find a way through the chaos. Predictably, a tiny group of old hands, all men, were the only ones who could take an active role in shaping decisions. The worst part was that I felt I had been there before - like maybe a hundred times during my student days. '*Damn*', I groaned to myself as I headed home, '*How are we ever going to organize this country if we can't even organize ourselves?*'

A day or two later I wandered into St. Louis' only leftist bookstore, which huddled in the crumbly district between the campus and the ghetto. Absentmindedly staring at the political theory section, I picked up a slightly

worn little book by Chairman Mao. I knew very little about Mao's writings at the time, but had noticed that people who were into Mao seemed to talk a little funny, using odd phrases I'd never heard before. Leafing through the book I came across this sentence: *'The enemies in the minds of the people are often more difficult to combat than imperialism itself'*. Remembering that terrible meeting, the sentence really struck home. And from what I knew of Mao's life, I knew he couldn't be putting out the old line about going off to get your heads together first, leaving the revolution for sometime in the far-off future. I scribbled the reference down on an old envelope and left the bookstore, determined to read and discuss and think about the idea some more. I've been reading and discussing and thinking about it ever since, which is what this book is all about.

'Enemies in the minds of the people'. It brings me an image of one of those seventeenth - century anatomical drawings of a head with the scalp peeled back so all the parts of the brain are exposed. Each area of the brain is connected by a line to a drawing of the special enemy that lurks there - one of the bat - like goblins or grotesque beasts of an age gone by. When I look at these goblins as today's *'enemies'*, their names become clear - racism, national chauvinism, sexism, age discrimination, class bias, possessive individualism, the doctrine of the sanctity of private property. But these modern goblins, we know, did not spring mysteriously from thin air. They sprang from the real economic and political forces that shaped this country.

It is crucial to understand that the goblins we fight through criticism and self - criticism are *not* fantasies, but the product of knowable economic and historical forces. This is important for two reasons. First, because it means that our shortcomings are not just personal failings, but are ultimately the results of the society we grew up in; and second, because it shows that criticism is only the beginning of change. We need criticism to help us counteract the influence of existing economic and historical forces - but we also need to unleash *new economic and historical forces* through organized revolutionary struggle.

To see the way our shortcomings are rooted in objective conditions, let's look at white supremacy, certainly the most hideous enemy that keeps us from unifying to unhorse the ruling minority that rides on our backs. Racism is not just an evil idea cooked up by big business to keep us apart - if it were, we could educate it away without much trouble. I have only to look at the history of my own family to see how deeply racism is rooted in the formation of the white working class. White supremacy in my family goes back as far as the beginning of our country, when my maternal ancestors, workers who had emigrated from the British Isles, found a common interest with merchants and industrialists in driving Native Americans from the Ohio Valley. My people - hard - working folk who only wanted a piece of land to farm - also shared a

material interest with the capitalists in subduing Native American peoples and conquering the continent. The goblin of racism and national chauvinism in the U.S. was christened with the intonation *'the only good Indian is a dead Indian'*.

Of course the fortunes of my family were very different from the fortunes of the robber barons who built the railways through the Ohio Valley and further west. The family farm was one of the institutions that was gradually ground out of existence in the jaws of monopoly capitalism, and my relatives were forced off the farm and into the cities to become part of the wage labor pool available for capitalist exploitation. Yet the goblin of racism lived on, confusing white workers into thinking that their natural allies were their enemies and vice versa. I will not forget the words of my grandmother, a white woman who struggled to raise five children all by herself on welfare during the depths of the Depression: *'The trouble with knee - grows, Vicki, is that they're dirty and dishonest - they even smell different. Watch, and you'll see'*.

Racism and national chauvinism are alive and well in a whole new generation of white workers, bringing us the picture of whites stoning blacks on the beaches of Boston, venting their frustration and resentment in exactly the wrong direction. White supremacy lives in all of us - the only difference between me and my grandmother, who went to her grave with these backward ideas, is that I have revolutionary theory, organization, and criticism/self-criticism to help me fight against it.

So we take up the weapon of criticism to get rid of the attitudes and ideas from our culture and daily existence that keep us from uniting to throw over the old order and build up a new one. This makes criticism very different from encounter groups or conventional therapy, where the purpose is to increase each individual's well - being or ability to adjust. We decide to do criticism not because it is best or most comfortable for us as individuals or as small groups, but because we think it will advance the whole - the whole group, the whole organization, the whole working class - ourselves included.

I've written this handbook for people who are fairly new to the revolutionary movement or to criticism / self - criticism. We'll start off by talking about the goals of criticism, showing how it is a kind of class struggle. Then we'll take a brief look at the underlying approach, which is dialectical materialism. Section Two gets us into specific practical guidelines for giving and receiving criticism in the most constructive way, and we'll end with a short history of criticism, including some examples of its use.

Part One:

Goals and Principles of Criticism and Self - Criticism

The overall goal of criticism and self - criticism is to strengthen us for victory in the class struggle. Criticism gives us a way to consciously transform ourselves into new women and men, persons capable of waging the long and bitter fight to build a socialist society.

There are two ways in which criticism can help us meet this ambitious goal. First, it helps us sort out ideas that serve our oppressors from ideas that serve the working people. When I really get hold of the fact that a particular attitude of mine holds back the struggle, I become politically motivated to change my ways, which is why we say that criticism and self - criticism is a form of class struggle in the realm of ideas. Second, criticism gives us a method for struggling to reach agreement on what we should do and why, and on how we should organize ourselves to carry out the work. So criticism helps us see the difference between right ideas and wrong ideas, and it helps us unite around what's correct.

Ideology

Let's take a longer look at this business of sorting out right ideas from wrong ideas. When I grew up, it was pretty easy to figure out right from wrong - I just looked around for the nearest parent, teacher, or high school football star to see what they said was right. About the time I was 12 or 13, I figured out that this way of operating didn't make it; a lot of what the authorities said was right for women sure seemed wrong to me, and it didn't take any account of what I was learning about racism and poverty in the North Side of St. Louis. So for several years I decided that there really *wasn't* any right or wrong, that every person had to see by her own lights, march to her own drummer, and so on. I'd be damned if I'd end up sitting in judgment on people, the way all those authorities had sat on me.

But then as I began to study Marxism, I got a whole new angle on what right and wrong were all about. Of course - Right and Wrong *weren't* written up in the sky in big golden letters, to be interpreted by Mom, my Sunday School teacher, or Mr. Big in Civics 101. But the more I studied the more I realized that some ideas *were* right and others *were* wrong, depending on the class whose interests they reflected and served. At this time in history, the working class is the class with the power and the potential to completely transform the way society is organized, and to do it for the benefit of all humanity. The perspective which represents the long - term interests of this class, I became convinced, was the right one.

But it is not only the working class (the more than 80 percent of our people who produce the goods and services we need to live) which has a set of ideas that represent its long - range interests. Every social class has an ideology - a system of legal, political, ethical, and religious ideas - which reflects its own interests. People see the world differently according to their frame of reference. If someone has his foot on my face, the world will look very different to me, lying there on my back, then it will to him, looking down on me. The same thing holds true for social classes. Workers see the world from one general perspective, big - time capitalists from another, and small business people (the petite bourgeoisie) from still another. We can learn the general characteristics of how different classes view the world, and then look for particular expressions of these class ideologies in our own thinking. That's how we can get our bearings and decide which ideas are on the right track and which have got to be scrapped. So let's look at the ideologies of the three main classes in our country today: the capitalist class, the working class, and the petite bourgeoisie.

The keystone of capitalist ideology is domination-submissiveness. Racism, sexism, and national chauvinism are the main ways of justifying oppression, while the notion of the unlimited rights of private property justifies the daily exploitation of workers by owners.

A second element of capitalist ideology is mystification, which portrays the way things are as the way things have to be. We internalize this belief in messages like *'The poor will always be with us'* or *'You can't fight city hall'*. The fact that capitalism is historically a rather new social system, and not at all permanent, is carefully concealed in books that present human history as a string of disconnected dates and brilliant moves by great men. Although mystification used to be grounded in religion (*'God wills it'*), the newer capitalist ideology derives its authority from science. The scientists who work for the rulers of our society would have us believe that oppressive conditions are the result of inevitable and neutral scientific laws. Modern technology, rather than the greed born of capitalism, we are told, is the cause of bureaucracy and pollution. *'The law of supply and demand'* and *'inevitable business cycles'* are the reason for inflation, recession, and unemployment. Mystification breeds passivity and obscures the fact that our social problems are rooted in a particular class order, an order that can be overturned.

A third aspect of capitalist ideology is the notion of possessive individualism, which says that the common good will be achieved through the selfish scrambling of each of us, a scramble mysteriously governed by the *'unseen hand'* of the market. Possessive individualism teaches us that *'people are naturally selfish'*, that freedom means the unlimited exercise of the individual ego, and that happiness lies in the accumulation of material things.

In contrast, working class ideology expresses the interests and aspirations of the people who produce society's wealth through their collective labor. Because the working class is in daily contact with the harsh reality of social production for private appropriation, and because it has the power to stop the flow of goods, services, and profits, we can come to see our potential to create a new order on a new economic foundation. The ideology that expresses the long - term interests of the workers has collectivity at its core, consistently placing the needs of the whole above the needs of the part.

Living precariously between the big capitalists and the workers is a social class called the petite bourgeoisie - literally, the small capitalists. (The adjective '*petit - bourgeois*' should *not* be used casually to describe anything we dislike, because the term has a specific historical, social, and economic meaning). This class is composed of independent professionals and craftspeople, small merchants and manufacturers. Some people include middle managers in this group as well. Small capitalists may be characterized as '*owning and directly producing their small - scale means of production, sometimes with the help of family members, and not selling their goods on the capitalist market. In general, they do not hire additional laborers, or only a few*' [1] This definition describes only about 5 percent of the people in the United States, and has nothing in common with the fuzzy idea of '*middle class*' that is constantly being pushed on us in the effort to obscure real class conflict.

Having grown up in an upper - crust professional family, I'm all too familiar with petit - bourgeois ideology. My daily life experiences bombarded me with the idea '*If you work hard, you'll be better than the rest*'. At school, we so - called '*smart kids*' were groomed to see ourselves as different from the '*greasers*' and '*sluts*' (the working class boys and girls). In a thousand small ways I learned to feel contempt for working people, for women who wore too much make - up, for people who didn't listen to classical music, for slobs who only watched TV.

Along with contempt for the people, a second familiar feature of the small owner's consciousness could be called '*the philosophy of the happy face*', as expressed in mottos such as '*if you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all*'. Petit - bourgeois ideology puts its highest priority on the appearance of pleasantness and gentility. This injunction to '*keep 'em smiling*' is a reflection of the objective class position of the petite bourgeoisie, whose precarious existence in the age of monopoly depends on winning customers and clients in order to survive.

A third aspect of petit - bourgeois consciousness is the unwillingness to work in a disciplined and collective style. This value appeared in the hippy movement and now flourishes in the personal growth '*biz*' under the slogans

'Do your own thing', and 'if it feels good, do it'. Within the revolutionary movement, this ideology takes on an anti - leadership character. In the early years of the (white) women's movement, many of us remember how all leadership was trashed as being 'male' or 'heavy'. Petit - bourgeois individualism also surfaces in a fear of discipline, or in ultra - democracy - in my desire to be present in person when *every* organizational decision is made, even though this cripples the effectiveness of the work. Historically, the fiercest advocates of loose, amorphous revolutionary groups have been independent intellectuals and professionals, who wanted a form in which they could be revolutionary without cramping their style. From these examples, it isn't hard to see how petit - bourgeois ideology ultimately serves the ruling class.

Criticism, then, is a method for analyzing the ideological roots of our actions. When an individual or organization repeats an error again and again, the root cause is probably capitalist or petit - bourgeois thinking, reflecting the real influence of either class. By analyzing the class position of any political line or action, we can better understand how to correct our mistakes.

Unity and Struggle

Besides helping us reach ideological clarity, the second purpose of criticism is to achieve unity among comrades. Faced with the armed might and the class - conscious organization of the ruling class, political and organizational unity becomes the main strength of working people. Unity and struggle exist in a dialectical relationship: I only bother to struggle for unity with an organization or an individual when my political analysis tells me that we have some initial basis for coming together. But unless we develop and strengthen our unity by struggling through our disagreements and doubts, and constantly reevaluate that unity as conditions change, then we quickly find that it is too superficial to allow us to function together when the chips are down.

Defining areas or principles of agreement is called establishing the basis of unity. Having a clear basis of unity is very important for any relationship or organization, because it provides the reference point for deciding when or what to criticize. For instance, in a loose coalition with a low level of unity ('*National Liberation for Puerto Rico*'), I am expected to engage in struggle on a fairly narrow range of issues directly related to the purpose of the coalition. In contrast, if I were a member of a highly disciplined cadre organization, I would be expected to do criticism on many issues, including a wide variety of political questions, ranging from what job I take to how I carry out the organization's position on trade unions, anti - sexism, and support for Third World struggles here and abroad. So the depth of day - to-day criticism I take on is often related to the amount of unity I have with the other person or

group; if it were not, I would have no way to decide what to criticize and with whom.

Two common mistakes are made in seeking the correct relationship between unity and struggle. One mistake is to emphasize unity at all costs. People who fall into this position fail to make a correct distinction between allies and enemies, or between working - class and ruling-class ideology. As a result, they seek to smooth over differences. They think that any struggle is bad, instead of seeing the difference between principled struggle, which is necessary to advance the movement, and dogmatic factionalism. This position often springs from the fear that '*someone might feel bad*' if a struggle goes on, or from an opportunist desire to maintain a vague, unprincipled alliance. In either case, the fear of struggle usually boils down to the fear that things will be messy for *me* if the struggle gets hot. This kind of liberalism arises from narrow self - interest, from thinking about what is good for oneself or a small group, and not about what is good for the whole movement.

The other mistake is to emphasize struggle at all costs. Some people struggle for unity based on absolute unanimity, because they see anything less as a form of unprincipled compromise. These dogmatists generally define *unity* as '*the identical interpretation of the revolutionary classics*'. They often spend most of their time dueling with quotations, and seldom venture into the messy real world. They fail to see that theory is meant to illuminate the problems which spring up in the course of changing the world, and that intellectual work can only be correct and valuable when it is accompanied by the practice necessary for a deep understanding of concrete conditions. Rather than pursuing the dialectical progression of unity - struggle - transformation, they proceed from unity to splinter group to fizzle. Their criticism and self - criticism comes out like '*trash and self - trash*', because they confuse care with softness and patience with liberalism. They forget Mao's words that '*to treat comrades like enemies is to go over to the side of the enemy*'.

Mao calls the process of building unity among comrades '*carrying out the work of one struggle and two helps*'. Unless criticism is practiced with the sincere desire to reach unity, he says, '*It is no good. It is nothing more than knocking each other down. Which is better, one more or one less (working together for the revolution)? It is better to have more people and mobilize every conceivable factor*'. [\[2\]](#)

Having outlined the purposes of criticism, let's go on to outline its underlying approach, materialist dialectics. Although I am painfully aware of my own limits in understanding materialist dialectics, I take encouragement from these words of Mao: '*Anyone who has social experience (experience in production and class struggle) originally knows dialectics. It is only that the knowledge is rather confused and the understanding is not complete and*

profound. If this common sense dialectics is arranged and made deeper, it should not be difficult at all. The reason that dialectics makes some people think it is difficult to learn is that there are no books on dialectics that are well written. This lecture of mine is also no good, because I myself am only beginning to learn dialectics. Books of explanations written in common words and speaking of ordinary experience should definitely be written' ('On Dialectics'). When I read these words, written by Mao after he had served for more than thirty years as the head of the Chinese Revolution, I felt more humble and at the same time more willing to share my common - sense understanding of dialectics. (You'll find a list of suggested readings for further study in the Bibliography at the back). Let me begin by defining the words materialism and dialectics as they apply to criticism and self - criticism.

Dialectical Materialism

Materialism is a philosophical outlook that is opposed to the philosophical school of idealism. (Both '*materialism*' and '*idealism*' are used here in a technical sense, not in such everyday senses as '*crass materialism*' and '*starry-eyed idealism*'). Materialism sees that our consciousness is decisively shaped by the experiences we have in the course of living and working in order to survive. Idealism, in contrast, explains people's consciousness by looking for the influences of spirits, '*nature*', and ideas alone. Let me give an example to show the difference.

Suppose we're trying to explain the fact that many of the older white women in our community organization don't speak out at neighborhood meetings. An idealist approach might yield explanations such as '*Women are just naturally more passive*', or '*It's just women's instinct to be receptive rather than aggressive*'. A materialist approach, on the other hand, would focus its attention on the concrete work experiences of women, experiences determined by the way labor in our society has been divided along sex lines. If a woman's daily life experiences consist mostly of doing unpaid housework and raising children in the isolation of the home, we can easily see the material basis for her quiet behavior.

From the idealist viewpoint, our attitudes and behaviors are rooted in mysterious forces beyond our control - so how can I hope to change if I am '*just naturally a shy person*'? From the materialist perspective, in contrast, my consciousness can be changed by changing my activity - for instance, if I practice speaking up in groups, my so - called '*shy nature*' can be transformed. The materialist perspective also emphasizes the fact that to change the consciousness of all of us in society, we must change our material reality by completely revolutionizing the way work in society is divided up and carried out.

Understanding that there is a material basis for consciousness also helps us understand why working - class ideology is the most progressive ideology in the world today. This doesn't mean that if your parents were factory workers you sprang from the womb with superior ideas; it means that the working class's daily experience of collective work and struggle creates the material conditions that encourage working - class people to see that society can and must be run in a completely different way.

Dialectics sums up the laws of how people and things change and develop. Here are some of the main principles of dialectics as they apply to criticism:

1. Everything changes. Everything is in a state of continuous change and development: *'the world is not to be comprehended as a complex of ready - made things, but as a complex of processes'*. [3] Failure to see the world as a place of continuous changes can make me see my comrades as unchanging. Then one of two things happens: either I fail to struggle - why waste the energy on someone who can't change? - or I struggle badly, trying to change people with a bulldozer approach which is guaranteed to mess up even the best personal and political relationships. Personal testimony: not too long ago, a couple of people in my work group raised some doubts they had about my opinions on trade - union work. In a flash, I polarized them into a position which:

(a) I was sure I would have to oppose with my dying breath;

and which:

(b) they'd never even held in the first place. I wanted to change their mistaken ways by blowing them off the map.

Luckily, people didn't let me go too far before they pulled me up short, showing me the harmful effects of the way I'd frozen their position and created a stand - off instead of a lively debate. Moving off their criticism, in the next discussion we worked hard to bring out everyone's questions and disagreements, predicating our discussion on the idea that people could be won over to the position that held up best in struggle. Rather than trying to blast away what I saw as immovable opinions, I tried to win people over to my viewpoint. There was a striking improvement in the openness and usefulness of the second debate.

2. *Change is caused by contradictions.* A second principle of materialist dialectics is that change comes primarily from the development of contradictions inside a person (though of course what's going on inside a person is very basically influenced by outside conditions). Everything is full of contradictions - for instance, there is a part of me that is courageous in

bringing out differences, and a part of me that wants to preserve peace at any price. There are parts of my understanding that are firmly grounded and will remain consistent, but I also know that some things I think and write today may embarrass me three months from now. The Chinese popularized this concept of contradiction in the saying, *'One divides into two'*. When criticizing a comrade, it is crucial to distinguish between her strengths and weaknesses, and to decide which is principal and which secondary. If I fail to *'divide her into two'*, I am likely to mistake her weaknesses as her dominant aspect and criticize in a way that demoralizes rather than helps. By the same token I need to learn to *'divide myself into two'*. Before accusing a comrade of being too domineering, for instance, I want to take a critical look at the contradictions inside of me. Besides seeing what *she* is doing that discourages me from taking initiatives, I should ask to what extent the obstacle lies in my own fear of stepping out. Which is the principal aspect of the contradiction between myself and her - her incorrect exercise of leadership, or my own unwillingness to initiate?

Because dialectics sees that change arises primarily from contradictions inside a person, it opposes the world view that people are like billiard balls, incapable of changing until hit by an outside force. In a dialectical view, changes can and should arise from an internal commitment on the part of the one who is changing. William Hinton described how this worked in an agricultural project in China: 'Time and again I told old Mr. Tu, head of the Chinese Liberation Area Relief Administration, that for the successful operation of the tractor project, this or that had to be done. "Yes," he would say, *'I am convinced that you are right. But I cannot just order it done. You see, we must talk it over. Everyone must know the reason why this is essential. We must have a meeting about it'*. [4] At the meetings, everyone would voice her opinion, evaluate the ideas that the leadership brought in, and develop an agreement that all could support.

While internal causes are the basis for change, external causes are also influential. For instance, Paula herself needs to decide that she will tighten up her style of work, after she thoroughly understands how her disorganization hurts the group. But other people can help her, by suggesting that she buy an address book and take notes at meetings, and by giving her feedback as she progresses.

3. Change is not smooth or steady. A third principle of dialectics is that change is not always gradual and linear, but instead takes sudden qualitative leaps. When Charlene first started working on the shop newsletter, she was terrified of writing because of earlier humiliating experiences she'd had as a working - class girl. Initially it was agonizing for her to write even one paragraph, and she had to talk into a tape recorder to get herself to state her ideas. Gradually, through working with co - workers and editing other people's

articles, she became more confident. Her attitude toward writing took a qualitative leap after she successfully completed a lead article for one issue. 'I can write', she thought, 'I can really write. All it takes is work'.

4. Everything is connected. The last principle of dialectics is that everything is connected and mutually influential, that people and things cannot be viewed in isolation. This means that people must be seen as part of a whole system of relationships. If someone acts in an anti - social way, for instance, society must take part of the responsibility. The principle of interdependence was expressed this way by the writers of *Lessons from the Damned*: 'We found out that the old down - home saying 'it takes two!' basically describes all our dilemmas. We couldn't have no master unless we agreed to be slaves. That applied to all relationships in this bourgeois system. The Man could not be boss unless the workers permitted him to be. The farms, factories, and banks did not run unless the workers worked. The husband could be the breadwinner and so - called boss, but the house did not run and the children did not get born unless the women worked for the man and permitted the conception of children'. [5]

How do these philosophical principles affect the actual practice of criticism and self - criticism? First, the dialectical materialist perspective stresses the active role of a person in her own transformation. To dialectical materialists, the world is knowable and changeable, and is not governed by mysterious forces outside human control. Allyn Rickett, a former U.S. spy who spent several years in a Chinese prison, describes how he benefited from this principle of active problem - solving. The occupants of Rickett's cell, by practicing criticism and self - criticism, 'soon became conscious of what we called the direction of our thinking. We found that almost invariably if a serious problem, either individual or collective, had arisen, it was because we were thinking inwardly and negatively instead of outwardly and positively.(For instance, when depressed, I would think) 'there's no sense in talking about it. I'll just have to work it out myself. What's the use of listening to my cellmates talk about the problem? They don't know anything about it anyway!' Rick states, 'By making a conscious effort to set our minds working - outwardly and positively - problems which had seemed insoluble simply ceased to exist. I was able to shake off completely the fits of depression which had plagued me all during prison, and in fact, throughout most of my life'. [6]

Dialectical materialism also teaches us to welcome struggle by showing that contradictions are in the nature of reality, and not to be feared - differences push our progress forward! Materialism reminds us that to achieve success, we need to bring our actions into correspondence with the objective world. Assuming that we do not have a selfish interest in hiding differences or difficulties, we will be eager to get contradictions out on the table so that we can solve problems and move things forward.

Finally, the dialectical method and our working - class world view will lead us to approach differences in a problem - solving spirit, rather than with an attitude of blaming and punishing. Because oppressed people share a fundamental common interest in socialist revolution, our conflicts should not be a clash of one personal interest against another, but a cooperative effort to discover the resolution that will advance the whole. Rickett described how this attitude looked in practice. *'In our cell we tried to look at our differing points of view in the detached manner of solving a problem instead of each trying to force the other to accept his own ideas and win the argument. [My cellmate Han] learned to put himself completely outside any disagreement which arose. Concentrating his energies on solving the problem, his entire attitude bespoke a desire to convince me rather than batter me down. No matter how insulting I became he would not lose his temper. If I were not prepared to talk, he was willing to wait. When I ranted and raved he would ignore me. He kept plodding away with the determination of a small bulldog, only one thing in his mind, to help me reach the root of my trouble'.*

Although as spies Allyn and Adele Rickett were enemies, criticism and self-criticism were still used in handling their case. In 1950, when the Rickets were jailed, the Chinese people had achieved decisive victory against the imperialists and their allies. Given this balance of power, the new Chinese people's government had no need to use more forceful means to keep the Ricketts from hurting others. With no thought of revenge, the Chinese educated the U.S. prisoners through extensive use of criticism, releasing the Ricketts four years later when they thoroughly and sincerely understood their errors. Sound unbelievable? Read the Rickett's own account in *Prisoners of Liberation*.

Part Two: Practical Guidelines and Exercises for Giving and Receiving Criticism

Introduction

Now that we've described the goals of criticism and taken a brief look at the principles behind it, we can begin to focus on specific guidelines for how to give and receive criticism in the most constructive way. Before getting into the guidelines, though, I'd like to set them in a context.

We said before that the purpose of criticism is to separate ideas that serve the capitalist class from ideas that serve the working class, so that comrades can unite around correct ideas. This means that the *content* of a criticism is primary. No matter how well I deliver a criticism, no matter how good my *form*, if the *content* hurts the working class struggle, then the idea is wrong and should be changed. When I was newer to the movement, I didn't understand this at all. I thought the main point of criticism was to keep everyone feeling good and to keep things running smoothly. When more politically advanced people would struggle over ideas, I nearly always thought they were being sectarian or unkind. My big breakthrough in understanding came when I studied the Chinese Revolution, and learned that in 1927, when the Chinese Communist Party operated from incorrect ideas, tens of thousands of people were killed and the liberation of the Chinese people was tragically delayed. The more I learn about the history of the communist movement, and see how frequently revolutionary movements have been derailed by their own errors, the more I realize that it can be a life - and - death matter to separate correct ideas (ideas that serve all working people) from wrong ideas (ideas that strengthen the rule of the capitalist class).

While the political content of a criticism is definitely primary, *how* we give criticism directly influences how well the content gets across. Well - expressed criticisms help clarify differences in ideas and make the class content of the contending positions more accessible to people; they are more likely to draw out the political issue and less likely to obscure it in a fog of personalizing and defensiveness.

The guidelines in this book are intended to help us give and receive criticism in a way that maximizes clarity and objectivity. They *do not* explain the content of which ideas serve the working class and which do not. Although content is the most important thing, we can get that only by studying Marx, Engels, Lenin, Mao, Cabral, Ho, and other great revolutionaries; through studying the history of our own country; and through practicing and evaluating our own work in disciplined organizations under the guidance of tested political leadership. I stress what the guidelines are good for, and what

they are not good for, to prevent possible misunderstandings. For example, someone new to the movement might learn about criticism and conclude that learning the guidelines is all she needs to become a good revolutionary. Conversely, a more experienced person, if she heard me emphasize process to the *exclusion* of political content, might reject the guidelines out of hand. Political content is primary, and the process of giving it is also important.

You'll find that these ground rules are mostly useful in the kind of criticism that goes on person - to - person in the course of daily living and political work. I touch very little on a more analytical and theoretical level of criticism, such as the kind of criticism one organization would make of another's political line. This is not to say that the ordinary day - to - day type of criticism is more important, but only that it's what I know best.

When I reread these guidelines, they look embarrassingly simple or commonsensical to me. Yet I know that it has taken me several years of patient effort to come to the point where I can usually apply these ground rules in these situations. The contradiction between the *obviousness* of dialectical principles of thinking and the real difficulty I have had putting them into practice, has led me to think about how my upbringing under capitalism systematically drilled me in undialectical and unconcrete habits of thinking. So along with the presentation of Guidelines 1 through 6, I'll include some comments from a political perspective that begins to analyze why and how we learned to think this way.

The material goes quite minutely into specific words and phrases. This is not because I'm interested in word games, but because I think the language we use significantly influences what we think, how we feel, and what we are able to do. While learning to use these guidelines, I often felt as awkward and hesitant as a beginner talking a foreign language. My old ways of thinking clung tenaciously, and the new ways started to feel natural only in the course of much practice. I've included exercises at the end of each section for people who want a structured way to learn.

Enjoy. How To Do Criticism:

GUIDELINE ZERO – Getting Your Head Together, or The Importance of Having Good Intentions

The most important part of giving a criticism happens before you ever open your mouth. It involves checking your head by asking yourself this question: Is my intention to protect and educate this person (or organization) to strengthen them for the class struggle, or is my intention to punish and coerce? A simple question, but everything depends on the answer.

Mao defines criticism in this way: *'Starting from the desire for unity, distinguishing between right and wrong through a struggle, and arriving at a new unity on a new basis'*. He contrasts this method of struggle with the incorrect method of *'ruthless struggle and merciless blows'*. *'The essential thing'*, he concludes, *'is to start from the desire for unity'*. So the emphasis in criticism should be to separate right ideas from wrong ideas so as to win both of you to the right position; no matter how sharp the struggle, the emphasis should *not* be on separating one person from another.

Adhering to this guideline is hard work: it has taken patience, and a willingness to live without getting my own way sometimes. Persuasion takes more time at first than strong - arming or guilt - tripping the other person. Then, too, trying to win someone over through the persuasiveness of my political rationale clearly takes mental exertion: I have to be able to deliver a clear, convincing argument as to why and how I think the change will benefit the person and the revolutionary struggle.

Lest all of this sound too saintly, let me make one thing clear. The *'protect and educate'* dictum doesn't apply indiscriminately to all people in all situations. Criticism and self - criticism is a form of struggle that is used only among the people - that is, among people who have no long - term class interest in oppressing and exploiting others. To give an obvious example: if an FBI agent comes to your door, criticism is *not* in order, and *'protect and educate'* simply doesn't apply. Mao's essay *'The Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People'* presents ways to analyze politically when criticism is called for. So the decision to work in the spirit of protecting and educating is the result of a political evaluation of the person(s) I am criticizing: which side are they on?

If I do not have a sincere commitment to the method of persuasion, the process of criticism and self - criticism simply won't work. All the guidelines in the world won't save me if I am using them to disguise a real desire to punish or manipulate the other person. Without this commitment, the rest of the

guidelines in this book become mere word - tricks, and people can smell tricks like that a mile away.

I recall one incident when a co-worker had to alert me that my commitment to non - coercive criticism had completely evaporated in the heat of struggle. Andy and I worked on the same project, but had come down on opposite sides of a debate about how to spend some of the organization's money. Andy wanted to spend a few hundred dollars now; I didn't approve of the expenditure and wanted the money to stay put until we needed it for something I considered more important. The group vote on the issue was coming up that night, so Andy and I decided to talk on the phone to see if we could come up with an agreement. As we talked, I began to feel worked up about the absolute moral superiority of my own position and the evilness of Andy's. How could he really care about the group's needs? If we wiped out the kitty now, where in the hell did he think we'd get more money later? Surely he must be *kidding* to want to spend money on something as trivial as *that!* I was all revved up to throw in some choice remarks about Andy's class background when he interrupted me in a firm tone:

'Wait a second, Vicki. Just hold it. Let me ask you something - I really want you to think about this. What do you want to be my r e a s o n for going along with you? Do you want me to be won over because I see what's best for the project, or do you want me to back down because I'm afraid of the names you'll call me if I don't?'

Ouch! Andy's question completely knocked the wind out of me. As I paused, speechless, I realized that I *had* stopped struggling from an attitude of mutual respect. I *had stopped* trying to educate and had fallen back into plain old brow - beating (with a sprinkle of guilt - tripping thrown in). So after stammering that he might have a point there, I said, *'Look, I need to think about it. Why don't we hang up for now and get together a little before the meeting tonight?'*

As I thought about it, I felt more and more grateful to Andy for pulling me up short. I realized that I probably *could* have used my leadership role in the group to shame Andy into doing things my way. But I'd seen enough struggles like that to know what would happen: resentment would build, the relationship of trust would be very severely damaged, and everyone would learn that it was dangerous to disagree with Vicki. Besides, if I was actually interested in getting across any political points to Andy, my sarcasm and personal slurs wouldn't exactly help.

With this sorted out, I went to the meeting and began with a self - criticism. I then proceeded to stick by my original position on the issue (but with all the unprincipled digs omitted). I felt much more clear - headed about the debate,

and together the group was able to make some real breakthroughs in sharpening up our political and financial priorities.

Since then, I've made it a habit to consciously check my own intentions before going into a hot struggle. Am I really committed to protecting and educating, or is there some lingering temptation to kick ass if I don't get my own way?

When I notice myself feeling clutched up about the Absolute Necessity of getting what I want (this is the feeling that makes me ready to fight dirty), I ask myself another question: Is anybody going to die if I don't get my way? Is it really worth damaging our trusting relationship to win right away on this issue? Usually, the answer is no. This helps me to keep my patience high enough so I can throw my energy into political persuasion rather than coercion.

The Vietnamese Communists give us an inspiring example of bone - deep commitment to the spirit of criticism and self - criticism under extraordinarily difficult conditions. David Hunter's article '*Organizing for Revolution in Viet Nam*' gives a detailed account of the central importance of criticism in building the relationship between the National Liberation Front and the Vietnamese people. In the words of a peasant: *'The Front's expansion was due to the fact that the people contributed their opinion to the cadres and informed them of many things that were going on. It was said that when the Front committed an error, the people contributed their opinion and, therefore, helped the Front correct these errors and serve the people better. The cadres worked in a democratic manner because they listened to the people and didn't order the people around arbitrarily, as the mandarins used to do'*. [7]

The NLF managed to pull through these extremely difficult times, says Hunter, largely because of the incredible patience and self - discipline of the great majority of the grass - roots cadres, who '*remained loyal to a mode of operation based on persuasion [even] when lack of response made this method appear ineffectual and even foolish'*. Since by then it was too dangerous to hold mass meetings to mobilize people, cadres carried on their persuasion through a multitude of small meetings. Cadres who were already strained to the breaking point by the amount of physical work required by the war, not to mention the pressure of keeping their own families from starving, now had to go to endless meetings, virtually house - to - house, to explain Front policies to the peasants. In the face of hostility and panic, they retained their commitment to the attitude of protecting and educating the peasants to win their support. If the Vietnamese could keep the faith under such conditions, surely we can, too.

How To Do Criticism:

GUIDELINE ONE – Being Concrete

In studying contradictions we must not be subjective and arbitrary, but must analyze them concretely. Without concrete analysis, there can be no knowledge of the particularity of any contradiction. We must always remember Lenin's words, the concrete analysis of concrete conditions.

[Mao Zedong]

The first guideline involves separating subjective opinions from objective facts; in other words, I want to distinguish my *inferences* about people from the actions I saw that led me to my conclusion. An observation about someone is a concrete description of something they *said* or *did*, rather than an abstract idea about what they *are*, *feel*, or *think*. Here are some examples that show the difference:

Subjective Interpretation

Helen is an irresponsible person, or Helen doesn't value our time.

Tom thinks he's God's gift to the group.

The new members are a bunch of petit - bourgeois anarchists.

That collective is high - handed and unresponsive.

Objective Observation

Helen showed up for the meeting 20 minutes late.

Tom gave a fifteen - minute explanation of a Marxist term without asking if people wanted to hear it.

Four of the new people said they thought we should rotate leadership instead of electing a leadership committee.

The collective said no to our proposal without giving specific reasons.

In giving and receiving criticism, why is it important to separate inferences from observations?

First, an observation is more likely to convey useful information to the person or group you are criticizing, and less likely to lead to unnecessary confusion and misunderstanding. Once I was asked to mediate a criticism session

between two men who were finding it impossible to work together. I asked Ted to tell John his criticism. *'Oh, what's the point!?' Ted burst out angrily. 'I've told him four times already and he hasn't changed!'* After some discussion, though, Ted finally agreed to give his criticism: *'John, you're just too domineering'*.

After a moment of tense silence John replied, *'Look, Ted, I still don't know what you're talking about'*. At that point I asked John to try to guess at the concrete observation Ted might have in mind. *'Is it that I talk more than other people in meetings?'* John asked. *'Oh, come off it John, you know what I mean'*, Ted snapped back. *'Don't play dumb with me!'* *'Well, is it the fact that I usually make up the agenda? Would you like us to rotate that job?'* John guessed again. *'No, that's not it at all'*, replied Ted, beginning to see that John's *'refusal to change'* may have had a lot to do with the vagueness of his own criticism.

'Look', said Ted slowly, *'Remember that big meeting we had a while back, when we all agreed on the spring work plan? After that meeting you just turned around and changed the plan yourself, without letting anybody know. Why decide things together if you're going to go off and change them by yourself?'* Once the men had grounded their conflict in a concrete action, rather than getting lost in an argument about a vague term like *'domineering'*, they were much closer to solving their problem.

Because observations increase the amount of useful information that gets across, they clear the way for bringing out political differences. If a group criticizes the leadership of its organization for being *'too power - hungry'*, no one knows exactly what the problem is or how to struggle through it. If, instead, the group gives a concrete observation - *'at the demonstration, the leaders made an organizational decision without consulting the membership'*, - then we can proceed to hash out real political differences over the role that leadership should properly play.

Another reason for trying to make concrete observations is to keep my own head working dialectically. The more I label people with abstract judgments, the more I tend to think of them as being incapable of change. Once I have labeled someone as *'a racist'*, for instance, I am less likely to criticize that person on their behavior: why waste my breath on a stone racist who can't change? This is called a self - fulfilling prophecy. Abstract character judgments also blind me to the ways that problems are rooted in systems of interaction, rather than in one person's character seen in isolation. Example: As long as I was labeling my co - worker Andy as a *'weak person'*, it was hard for me to identify exactly what he was doing that I didn't like; and while my head was clogged with value judgments, there was no way for me to get clear on what I wanted him to do differently. Also, I couldn't see how my own

behavior might contribute to the problem. (Notice how a label like '*weak person*' locates all the difficulty with the other person).

The first step in changing the situation was getting myself clear on a concrete description of the problem. My observation was that Andy did things after I suggested them, but had never initialed a project himself. The next step was to share this criticism with him: somehow it seemed a lot less scary to confront him with a concrete problem than it did to lay out a loaded and static judgment like, '*Andy, did anyone ever tell you that you're a weak person?*' After I had placed the problem on the table, Andy showed me that I too had contributed to the situation: '*The way you come across, Vicki, made me assume you were impatient with my inexperience, and that you didn't want me to bug you with projects that I'd need advice on. I figured you wanted me to just lay back*'.

Of course if we think about others in terms of static categories, we're likely to dose out the same medicine to ourselves. One woman described how she paralyzed herself politically by thinking of herself in isolation from the conditions that influence her. '*I'll be in a meeting*', she said, 'and I'll find myself feeling really competitive. Then I'll trash myself for feeling that! I say to myself, '*You don't know how to relate in the new ways! You're no good to anybody! You'll never change! All my energy goes into grinding myself down. Then I want to just give up and go hide in my room for a week*'. One - sided thinking leads us to blame and punish ourselves and each other for individual deficiencies, rather than seeing how our shortcomings are related to the class system. It gives us a lopsided and inaccurate view of things, and saps the energy we could be using to solve problems in our political work.

By saying that it is important to know how to distinguish observations from opinions, I am *not* saying that we should avoid making value judgments. If a leaflet seems racist, say that. If an idea seems wrong, call it wrong. The point is that these opinions should be grounded in and explained by concrete observations.

The Politics of Judgment

Soon after I learned the distinction between inferences and observations, I decided to keep a list of all the vague judgments I made in a day, in the first eight hours of my experiment. I accumulated a list of well over 100 abstract character judgments: '*I'm just too passive*'. '*She's such an uptight person, ad nauseam*'. It was easy to see how this kind of pigeonhole thinking kept me from seeing things deeply, and made it hard for me to give and receive criticism in a useful way. The length of the list led me to reflect back on the particular ways I had been indoctrinated in this kind of static and undialectical thinking.

I remember that in the first grade my teacher divided us up into three reading groups. For all practical purposes, the groups might have been labeled the Bluebirds, the Redbirds, and the Vultures, because everybody got the point: some people were *dummies* and other people were *smart*. These labels were taken to be permanent character attributes - although there were frequent exhortations to work hard and get ahead, everybody knew that a Vulture was pretty much a Vulture for life. Two years later, we were tracked into completely separate programs, and were well on our way to becoming '*greasers*' and '*school leaders*'. Ten years later, right on schedule, the Bluebirds went east to Ivy League schools, the Redbirds went off to State College, and the Vultures made it to trade schools if they were lucky. By this time we were all supposed to have been convinced that this arrangement was fair and proper. The superior character of the Bluebirds had manifested itself, and the Vultures had got what they deserved. In a million tiny ways, the Bluebirds had been taught that they possessed the abstract character traits that made them '*leadership material*' - entirely fit to rule. Hopefully too, the Vultures had learned their place.

In fact, this ideological molding *does* to some extent achieve its goal. In their book *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, Sennet and Cobb show how this works: 'In talking to older laborers who worked in large factories, we often heard them express anger (about the unfairness they encountered at work) yet that anger was often turned around by final statements like '*they must have their good reasons*', or '*they're educated people, they must know what they are doing - maybe there are things about this I don't know*'. [8] Robert Lane drew the same conclusion from extensive conversations with fifteen working men: '*Although every one of the men agreed that class inequalities stacked the cards unequally, each made an exception of himself. I just played around in school. It's my own fault, I didn't develop myself like I could've. If I had only worked harder and stayed in school, I could've got somewhere*'. [9] This internalized oppression is a primary instrument of class rule in the United States, causing us to turn against each other and ourselves, rather than against the system that oppresses us. One writer sums it up this way: Objectification (through vague character judgments) serves in the main only two purposes:

(1) as a defense against the other and as a defense against any possible responsibility for her or his situation (as in the terms a moron, a lunatic, a chick, etc.);

and

(2) as a precondition of and as an excuse for the oppression, and exploitation - or worse - of that and other. (As in the U.S. military's use of '*a gook*' or '*a dink*' to describe the Vietnamese.). [10] Not only are these labels slapped on

us by those who want to control us, but worse, we learn to wield them against each other as well.

The static and categorical thinking we learn is the perfect breeding ground for inculcating us with racist, sexist, national chauvinist, and ageist ideologies. Each of these ideologies grows out of the inner economic necessities of the capitalist system. Racism, for instance, is not just an evil scheme cooked up by the ruling class to keep working people divided. Instead, material conditions in the U.S. three hundred years ago meant that some people had to be harnessed as a cheap, stable labor force to work the Southern plantation economy. If it hadn't been Blacks who were subjected to slavery, it would have been some other people. To prevent unity between Blacks and poor whites, the ruling class developed a system of relative benefits for white workers. Down through the centuries this system of relative privilege has been frighteningly successful in getting white working people to accept and even actively enforce racist organization of society. So the process of ceasing to objectify each other depends not only on recognizing and combating the patterns of thought we have internalized, but also on removing the material basis for these ideologies.

Exercise on Guideline One: Being Concrete

Below is a list of inferences or subjective statements for you to translate into observations. If you're doing this with someone else, it's fun to read the statements as though they were a criticism of the other person: *'You're irresponsible!'* The person on the receiving end can try to translate this into an observation, making up a context since none is given: *'Is it because I didn't finish the list of phone calls on time?'* You can help each other if anyone gets stuck.

To review this guideline: Observations refer to actions (*'She said or did X'*), not to abstract categories (*'She is a Y'*). An observation avoids any inference about a person's motives; for example, the observation *'He did not return my phone call'* avoids the inference *'He refused to return my call'*. Giving direct quotes or concrete examples may help you express observations. For example, say *'He says things like don't be ridiculous'* rather than *'He puts people down'*. Here's the exercise list:

She's irresponsible.

She's arrogant.

This organization is too bureaucratic (said to a leader by a member).

You're acting like a heavy.

He's acting so *male* and *intellectual*!

They're so petit - bourgeois.

You're so together.

You're putting me in a passive position by the way you are chairing the meeting.

Your collective has a very sectarian style of work.

How To Do Criticism: GUIDELINE TWO - Describing Feelings

The purpose of Guideline 1 is to push myself to be concrete and precise in describing what I am criticizing. Next, it's often important to clarify the subjective part of the criticism - the feelings that go with it. Clarifying feelings can do several things: first, it can help me get a handle on my feelings, so they don't go underground, outside my conscious control, where they could burst out in destructive ways. Second, by verbalizing feelings I can let the other person know where I'm at in a way that makes me humanly accessible to her. Describing my feelings encourages me to take responsibility for my own end of the contradiction, and thus avoid laying the blame entirely on the other person. (Notice the difference between giving my judgment, '*You're arrogant*', and explaining my feeling, '*I'm feeling jealous and competitive about how well you know how to speak*'). Next, explicitly describing my feelings cuts down the chances that someone will misread my emotions. For instance, if I don't tell people that I'm *nervous* about chairing a meeting, they will often think I am acting *cold*. Another reason to know my own feelings is that sometimes, but not always, my negative feelings can tip me off that something is wrong or unjust in the outside world.

As people begin to study Marxism - Leninism, and learn the importance of being able to analyze a situation objectively, they sometimes tend to see feelings themselves as the enemy. People who have been slaves to their emotions for too long fall into the trap of thinking the ideal is to have *no* feelings. The problem with trying to just suppress or ignore feelings is that it simply doesn't work. One woman I know operates like a revolutionary computer most of the time, but she has a breakdown once every six months, when she has to drop everything to spend three weeks recovering in bed.

The opposite mistake is putting feelings in command. Many of us painfully remember the days in the (white) women's movement when if someone felt *bad*, it was automatically assumed that she had been righteously aggrieved, and that all business should cease until she felt better. In this way, feelings could be used as a club: one person says '*I feel alienated*', and a meeting of fifty people is expected to drop everything for however long it takes to deal with it. In fact, this is a way of succumbing to individualism, the capitalist ideology of putting the needs of the part above the needs of the whole. When we put feelings in command we forget how thoroughly we have internalized the ideas of the capitalist class. Sometimes I feel bad because the competitive or self - centered parts of me are threatened. While I still want to acknowledge these feelings so I can get to the bottom of them and change them, it would be wrong to act on them in an uncritical way. Our task, then, is to bring our subjective feelings into proper correspondence with our

objective understanding, neither letting our emotions run away with us nor pretending that they aren't there.

I find that when I *know* my feelings, I am much less likely to let them lead me in blind ways. Unfortunately, though, there are two big obstacles to getting through to my feelings. One is the whole tangle of injunctions I internalized: *'People will only like you if you keep smiling', 'You shouldn't feel that way', 'Don't be a wet blanket'*. The second obstacle is my own training to play the victim, to concentrate on what the other person is doing to me rather than taking any responsibility for how I respond. Notice that the following phrases do not describe emotions at all, but instead say what I *think* the other person is doing wrong: *'I feel condescended to', 'I feel that you're patronizing us', 'I feel misunderstood', 'I feel rejected'*. Notice that if I *think* you're condescending to me, I might *feel* various ways - either angry, or hurt, or impatient, or whatever. So the first point is that we should learn to spot the difference between our feelings and our thoughts.

Especially for those of us from white middle - class backgrounds, it's no simple matter to learn how to describe feelings - I was trained to be so cut off from feelings that I had hardly any vocabulary to help me communicate my emotions to others or to focus them for myself. I've included a List of Feeling Words at the back for people who also find themselves speechless in this way.

Analyzing the Class Origin of Feelings

When I have a heavy emotional reaction, I generally want to sort out my own reaction before snapping into a criticism right away. Three elements come into play here.

First, *I identify the thought or value that caused the feeling*. Realizing that my feelings come from my values was a very strange idea to me, because I'd been drilled in the mechanical idea that feelings are forced on me by the outside world: *'He made me angry', or 'They hurt my feelings'*, I was also taught that I could control the feelings of others: *'Don't quit school or you'll make your poor mother miserable'*. This notion weakens us tremendously: if I believe that other people can create my feelings, I am at the mercy of what they say or do; conversely, if I think that I can control other people's feelings, I will be afraid to do anything to which someone might have a negative reaction.

In rejecting the mechanical notion that our feelings are thrust on us from outside, we come to the dialectical understanding that our feelings come from our thoughts and values (which themselves in turn are heavily influenced by class society, as we will see below). Let's contrast the two views on the origins of feelings.

A. Mechanical View of Where Feelings Come From. The outside event *controls* my feelings. For example: They criticized my leaflet (event), therefore they *made* me humiliated (feeling).

B. Dialectical View of Where Feelings Come From. The outside event (1) is filtered through my thoughts and values (2) and I have a feeling (3).

(1)	(2)	(3)
(a) They criticized my leaflet.	(b) If I think they're trying to put me down and think this is terrible	(c) I might feel embarrassed or furious.
	(b) If I think they're trying to put me down and see this as their shortcoming	(c) I might feel sad about the state of the movement
	(b) If I think I can learn something from the criticism	(c) I might feel excited and appreciative

In the dialectical view, although I can't always control outside events (1), I *can* learn to make conscious decisions about how I evaluate the event (2), which means I take an active role in determining which feelings I experience (3). Just knowing that other people cannot by themselves control my feelings makes me feel less vulnerable and passive in relation to other people's actions. *'When you realize that it takes two, more power is in you'.*

So after identifying my feelings, I trace down the thought or value that caused the feeling. This thought might represent my *'old'* self, the baggage I picked up from my petit - bourgeois background or capitalist society, or it might represent the kind of thought that reflects the long - range interests of the working class. If I catch myself falling into the old kinds of thinking, I can consciously try to take a working - class stand on the situation. For example: Once my friend Ann was late for a meeting. As the minutes ticked by without a ring from the doorbell or a phone call, I got more and more furious. *'She's just trying to let me know how important and busy she is - if she had any respect at all she would have called by now'*. I was busily steaming myself into a fit when I remembered to take a look at what was going on inside me. First I realized that I was angry mainly because of my *interpretation* about her motives - if I had known she had car trouble, for instance, the actual lateness would not have bothered me. Next I tried to analyze the class content of the thought that was making me so angry - I had to admit that a lot of what I was thinking was bound up with preserving my self - importance - and such concern for my own self image was hardly an example of a firm working - class stand. After this self - criticism, I consciously tried to replace my original interpretation with a more constructive thought: *'OK, she's late, a lot of things could have happened. I can criticize her for it, and she will probably clean up*

her act. Now, what can I work on until she gets here, so I can use this time constructively? By this time, I was completely calmed down. When Ann arrived fifteen minutes later, I was able to explain how her lateness had inconvenienced me and then proceed with the meeting. To completely internalize working class ideology is a process that will take decades of ideological remolding - after all, we didn't learn bourgeois and petit - bourgeois thinking overnight. Because the struggle against capitalist ideology inside ourselves is a reflection of the class struggle going on in society, it would be idealistic to imagine that if we were just *'good'* enough we could somehow be individually exempt. In fact, the class struggle inside us will persist even after a socialist revolution, until all the social divisions inherited from capitalism have withered completely away.

The Politics of Emotions

It is nothing new to announce that we are socialized to avoid expressing our feelings: *'Big boys don't cry', 'You know we mustn't hate our teachers'*. Our alienation from our feelings, from each other, and from our unique human ability to plan before we create, all reflect the fact that working people are objectively alienated from the tools and resources we need to produce the necessities of life. To guarantee that the capitalists would have a pool of workers who could be exploited for private profit, our ancestors were ripped away from their means of production and thrown into the labor market, where they were forced to work for the owners in order to live. The peasants of Europe were thrown off their land during the enclosures, communal property was forcibly expropriated by the capitalist class, and small independent craftspeople were driven out of business to become wage slaves. Whole nations of people in the Third World were thrown off their land and subjected to severe exploitation and oppression. This is the concrete historical origin of our feelings of alienation.

Folk wisdom has it that when you go to work, you leave your feelings at home. *'If work was supposed to be fun, you wouldn't get paid for it'. 'Nobody asked you to like it, just do it'*. In a productive system where everything is run from the top down for the benefit of the men at the top, people must be predictably willing to perform dehumanizing and brutal tasks. Predictability is vital to keeping the machines running profitably; it is a capitalist's dream that the people who run the machines will be as reliable and passive as things. In fact, though, one of the biggest worries now confronting the capitalist class is worker rebellions against the intensified exploitation of advanced capitalism - expressed in waves of wildcat strikes, lowered productivity and sharply increased absenteeism, sabotage, and job turnover.

In their own words, two workers describe what they have learned about feelings on the job. The first speaker is Ernest Bradshaw, a black supervisor in a bank auditing department, quoted by Studs Terkel:

'I'm not too wrapped up in seeing a woman, fifty years old, get thrown off her job because she can't cut it like the younger ones. They moved her off the job, where she was happy'.

'Some people can manage and some people can't manage. I figure I can manage. But it's this personal feeling - it just doesn't seem right for me to say to this woman. Okay, I'll rate you below average. She has nobody to support her. If she got fired, where would a woman fifty years of age go to find a job? I'm a good supervisor. I write it up the way it's supposed to be written up. My feeling can't come into play. What I do is what I have to do. This doesn't mean I won't get grey hairs or feel kind of bad'.

'They knew I didn't particularly care for doing it. They knew my feelings. I told them she was a good woman. They said, as you can't let personal feelings come in. We'll give her about five months to shape up or ship out. She was put on probation'.

'That's the thing you get in any business. They never talk about personal feelings. They let you know that people are of no consequence. You take the job, you agree to work from eight - thirty to five and no ifs, ands, or buts. Feelings are left out. I look at people as people, person to person. But when you're on a job, you're supposed to lose all this'. [\[11\]](#)

Luigi, an acquaintance of mine, had been a soldier in Vietnam:

'I will tell you what really hurt me about growing up as a man here in this country. It's when they tell you, 'a man's not supposed to cry'. When I was over in Nam, in the jungle, it was crazy. You knew you didn't have any business being in these people's country anyway, but there you were, fighting. There was this helicopter, it was getting shot down, and I could see all my buddies dying [tears come into Luigi's eyes, and he has difficulty talking]. My buddies were dying, man, it was so sad it would make a stone cry. But they said, 'A man isn't supposed to cry. Get back in there and fight'.

'I say it's good to cry sometimes. But it's taking me a long time to learn how again'.

The denial of feelings is essential to exploitative or dominant - submissive power relationships. *'If I exploit you, then I do not take your feelings as seriously as I take my own. If you exploit me, then you do not take my feelings as seriously as your own'. [\[12\]](#)* The oppressed must be objectified as things

that 'deserve' or even prefer their fates, as in the myth of the happy darkies or the little woman at home. We are also taught a soulless 'scientific neutrality' as part of our alienation training: a high school student's history paper, speaking up against U.S. slavery, earns a red - penciled marking from the teacher: *'Your feelings are showing too much. This is dangerous to objectivity'*.

On the job, we are forced to cooperate in our own oppression by deadening our feelings enough so that we can make it through a day of alienated work. We survive, all right, but at a heavy cost. *'I'm a paraprofessional in a public school', says Emily, a friend of mine, 'and all day long I can see kids being destroyed. It tears me up inside. The only way I can get through the day is to turn myself off. I put so much effort into not feeling, that I'm totally exhausted at the end of the day. By the time I get home, I'm so drained that all I can do is watch TV'.*

Suella, a secretary, has her own version of the same story. *'The boss will come in and say something to me, nothing horrible, but just one of those little insults we get all the time. I can't blow up at him - it's not really a big thing, and besides, I'd probably get fired. So instead I just get depressed. I may not even know I'm feeling bad, but it's just a gray cloud of depression that might descend for the rest of the day'.*

Roberta, a prostitute, sums it all up in this quote from a Terkel interview:

'You were the lowest of the low if you allow yourself to feel anything with a trick - the way you maintain your integrity is by acting all the way through. You become your job. I became what I did I became cold, I became hard, I became turned off. I became numb. Even when I wasn't hustling I was a hustler. I don't think its terribly different from somebody who works on the assembly line forty hours a week and comes home cut off, numb, dehumanized. People aren't built to switch on and off like water faucets'. [\[13\]](#)

This alienation from ourselves reaches from the bottom to the top of the hierarchy. Larry Ross, a retired president of a conglomerate, talks about social relations in the capitalist firm:

'Why didn't I stay in the corporate structure? As a kid, living through the Depression, you always heard about the tycoons, the men of power, the men of industry. And you kind of dream that, gee, these are supermen. These are the guys that have no feeling, aren't subject to human emotions, the insecurities that everybody else has. You get in the corporate structure, you find they all button their pants the same way everybody else does. They all got the same fears. [The executive] is no different than anybody walking down the street. We're all subject to the same damn insecurities and neuroses - at every level. Competitiveness, that's the basis of it.

As he struggles in this jungle, every position he's in he's terribly lonely. He can't confide and talk with the guy working under him. He can't confide and talk with the guy he's working for. To give vent to his feelings, his fears, and his insecurities, he'd expose himself. This goes all the way up the line until he gets to be president. The president really doesn't have anybody to talk to. Because the vice presidents are waiting for him to die or make a mistake and get knocked off so they can get his job.

You say, money isn't that important. You can make some bad decisions about money, that's not important. What is important is the decisions you make about the people working for you, their livelihood, their lives.' It isn't true.

To the board of directors, the dollars are as important as human lives. There's only yourself sitting there making the decision, and you hope it's right. You're always on guard. Did you ever see a jungle animal that wasn't on guard? You're always looking over your shoulder. You don't know who's following you'. [\[14\]](#)

When we are alienated from our means of livelihood, from our feelings, and from each other, we are less likely to focus on the systematic causes of our pain, and more likely to turn to the external palliatives that are constantly pushed on us: drugs, alcohol, food, consumer items, and so on. Our alienation as producers makes us easier targets for alienated consumption. Carol, a middle - aged, middle - income woman, put it like this:

'For me, buying things is a poor substitute for what I really want. I really want to be part of something larger, to be part of some sort of community. But if I don't have that, and I can't see how to get it, then I'll redecorate the dining room or something. I don't think I'm so different from most people'.

Pat, a postal worker, describes how she uses consuming to stave off depression from work: *'I was furious at that damn supervisor. He was wrong, he knew he was wrong, but there was nothing I could do about it. I kept thinking to myself. I'm gonna go home, and I'm gonna bake me fifty biscuits and I'm gonna cover 'em with butter and honey, and I'm gonna eat them all, every one'.*

Business interests play on this socially induced vulnerability in the most cynical way. Driving home from work during the rush hour, we hear from the solicitous voice of the radio announcer crooning: *'The work day is over. You can come alive again. Drink Heublein sherry'.* The next commercial is a woman's voice: *'Life can get you down a little. But there's no reason to stay down in the dumps when you can get a real pick - me - up with a new furniture suite from Otto's. Come in today, we're open till nine!'* Psychiatrists sell relief for \$30 an hour, and a very few can purchase escape at the local growth

center or ashram on weekends. First capitalism robs our lives of human satisfaction, then it sells us back plastic substitutes at marked - up prices.

The result is that many of us learn to fear our own feelings as alien, uncontrollable forces. *'I'm so afraid of getting angry'*, said one working woman. *'There's so much anger inside that I'm afraid it will spill out and dissolve me in chaos. When I start feeling angry I get afraid I might murder someone. So instead of getting angry, I make myself go dead inside'*.

This denial of our feelings, or their expression in random acts of violence, will continue as long as we are isolated and disorganized, until we have a political channel into which our energies can flow. Successful revolutionaries the world over have consciously recognized the need to arouse and collectivize the emotions of the people. In *'speak bitterness'* sessions in China and Vietnam, for instance, the outrage of the peasants was channeled from little drops of individualized anger and shame into a river of revolutionary determination. Under the leadership of the Chinese and Vietnamese Communist Parties, these feelings were organizationally, politically, and militarily directed until feudalism and imperialism were completely swept away.

So it is important that revolutionaries recognize the extent of alienation and emotional isolation in our country, and that our planning speak to this need. We must not leave the problem to the profiteers who manipulate our alienation, or to the industrial psychologists with their pseudo - participation and their pseudo - belonging. As revolutionaries, we must build up a people's culture that counters the hollowness by nourishing our sense of struggle and mutual love.

Exercise on Guideline Two: Describing Feelings

Only some of the statements in the following list describe what I call feelings; others communicate thoughts, usually about what the other person is doing to the speaker. The exercise is to try to spot the sentence that contains *thoughts* and then translate them into sentences that describe *feelings*.

Watch out for two common abuses of Guideline 2. First, look out for any tendency to sneak in thoughts or judgments under the guise of feelings. It looks like this: *'I feel that you are the most selfish person I've ever met'*, or *'I feel like you are totally inaccessible'*. Or more subtly, *'I feel put down'* – which translated means *'You're putting me down, you schmuck'*. All of these statements tell what I *think* the other person is or what she is doing to me. While this may be a good device for avoiding the responsibility of saying where I'm at, it is *not* expressing my own feelings.

Next, watch out for the habit of saying '*I feel*' when you should be saying '*I think*'. Many of the women I know, including me, express political positions in this tippy - toe way: '*According to my analysis of the economic crisis, I feel we should focus on fighting social service cutbacks*'. You don't *feel* an analysis, you *think* it! Saying '*I feel*' in this instance only makes it more difficult for other people to disagree. For this exercise, the List of Feeling Words in the back of the book may help you.

I feel you are ignoring me.

We were really angry about how you handled our proposal.

I feel misunderstood.

I'm really ticked off that you didn't do your preparation.

I feel like I'm in a one - down position compared to leadership.

I feel as though you're being unfair. Here are my comments on each statement above:

This statement says that I *think* the other person is ignoring me. To express my feeling about this thought, I might say '*I feel hurt*', or '*I'm angry*'.

This statement expresses a feeling.

'*Misunderstood*' is one of those sneaky blame words. It would be better to say something like, '*I feel frustrated because I think you're misunderstanding me*'.

This is a feeling.

This is a statement of what I *think* my situation is. A feeling might be, '*I'm really pissed off about what's happening between membership and leadership in our work group, because I think*'.

The statement is my thought. A feeling might be, '*I'm really mistrustful*'.

How To Do Criticism: GUIDELINE THREE - Stating Wants

After I've gotten clear on what I'm reacting to (the observation) and how I feel about it, I focus on clarifying what I want the other person(s) to do differently.

Although this sounds embarrassingly obvious, I find that all my training in powerlessness and passivity sometimes makes it difficult for me to do this in practice. I had learned early in life that it was rude and selfish to say what I wanted, and that instead I should ask leading questions (*'Don't you think it would be a good idea to let somebody else talk?'*) or hint (*'It sure would be nice if someone would volunteer to do these phone calls'*) or sit back passively, hoping that the other person would be *'sensitive enough'* to read my mind (*'If you really cared about me, you'd have known'*). Saying exactly what I want - *'Barry, I wish you'd wind it up'*, or *'Pearl, I really want you to help me with these phone calls'* - that would be much too easy!

The idea of expressing wants has three parts:

- (1) Say directly who you want to do something, rather than leaving it vague.
- (2) Specify concretely what you want the other person(s) to *do* or *say*, rather than what you want them to *be* or *feel*.
- (3) Stress what you *do* want, rather than just what you *don't* want. Let's look at these three points in more depth.

The first point involves saying directly *who* I want to do something, rather than leaving this implied. Directness of this sort can feel risky, because it means really putting a finger on the problem. It's clearly easier for me to address my want to everybody in general and no one in particular - *'I think we should all reevaluate our basis for unity'* - than it is to say what I really mean:

'Doris and Pat, from some of the political differences that have been coming down lately, I've come to really doubt whether you should be in the collective. I'd like us to take up that question next time we meet'. Wants that are addressed to the universe in general, I've found, rarely make it to the people they were intended for.

The second point has to do with stating wants concretely, rather than using vague abstract terms. Recently my friend Hank brought up a problem he was having:

'Some people in the political economy class I'm teaching told me that they wanted me to stop being such a typical male intellectual. I really felt bad about

what they said, because it was hard for me to learn from it. I still don't know exactly what I was doing that they didn't like, or what they wanted me to do differently. So where are things now, Hank? I asked. It got even worse, he groaned. The next week I came back, not aware of doing anything different, but they said I was really improving! I'm more at a loss than ever!

To give another example: in the midst of a frustrating meeting, one of the chairpersons burst out, *'People have just got to be more supportive of the leadership!'* Everyone sat there feeling confused and guilty, but no one knew that what the speaker wanted was for the membership to vote approval for a motion that the leadership had put forward a little while before.

Third, action - wants involve saying what I want someone to *start* doing, rather than just what I want them to stop doing. Although it takes almost no effort for me to get clear on what I *don't* want, I find that a negative statement often doesn't get me the results I'm after. I remember telling a co - worker that I *didn't want* him to call women *'chicks'*; he tried to comply, in all innocence, by referring to women as *'gals'* and *'girls'*. Also, positive wants are just plain easier to hear. When someone tells me they *don't* want to use my suggestion, I'm likelier to get defensive than if they say, *'I want to do such and such instead, for these reasons'*.

Recently I ran into a typical example of the needless aggravation groups can get into when people express their wants in a fuzzy way. An hour into a planning meeting of a class that had been running for several weeks, one man burst out: *'What's the point of doing all this planning anyway! We're not going to get anything accomplished in here!'* After a shocking silence, everyone started to jump in with their arguments and explanations: *'How could you say that, Ed? Everyone else thinks we're accomplishing a lot! And so on. Ed kept repeating his statement: I tell you, it won't come to anything'*. I could feel tempers shortening all around me, and my own impatience was reaching the boiling point - I was close to bursting out, *'You've got a hell of a lot of nerve busting up the meeting with that defeatist stuff!'* Just in time, though, one woman, Judy, started to guess what Ed *wanted* from us. After a couple of minutes of back and forth, with Judy trying to clarify Ed's wants in action terms, the issue became clear. *'That's right, Judy, said Ed, all I'm trying to say is that I'm discouraged that just when the class is really getting good we're going to stop meeting. I'd like us to extend the class for several more weeks'*.

After the relief of finally understanding Ed, I couldn't help but think how much easier it would have been for everyone if he had been able to clearly state his want in the beginning. I could well imagine another end to the story: if Judy had not helped clarify things, the whole interchange might well have had a tense, negative ending, with everyone resenting Ed's *'obstructionist'* behavior, and Ed convinced that the group was unresponsive after all.

This principle of stating positive rather than just negative wants also applies in a broader political sense. One rank - and - file union organizer of many years said, *'Every minute your caucus spends putting forward a positive program is worth 20,000 cheap potshots at the union bureaucracy. Most people already know that the bureaucrats are selling them out - but folks will only move when they see something that's worth fighting for'*.

Exercise on Guideline Three: Stating Action - Wants

The following is a list of abstract or negative wants that you can translate into concrete action - wants. Since there is no context provided, just make up your own. In summary, action - wants say:

1. *Who* you want to do something. (*'I want you to talk less in meetings, Paul and Esteban'*, rather than *'It would be good if everyone would be more sensitive about shutting up so the sisters can talk'*.)
2. What you want the person to *do* or say concretely. (*'I want you to volunteer for child care regularly'*, rather than *'I wish you would be more supportive of mothers'*, or *'I want you to feel more responsibility'*).
3. What you do *want* rather than what you *don't want*. (*'I want you to give an example of what you mean'*, rather than, *'Don't talk so abstractly'*).

So, here's the exercise list:

1. You should quit hiding your politics.
2. I want you to be more supportive.
3. I think people in this group should trust each other more.
4. You should stop acting so subjective.
5. You should feel more self - confident.
6. Would you like to help out with the collating?
7. I should be more organized.
8. I want you to listen to me!
9. And for the home front, try making *this* into a concrete statement: I want you to love me.

Some comments on each exercise:

- 1.** This is a negative and fuzzy want. A better statement would be something like this: *'If you disagree, I want you to say so in the meeting, rather than talking about it with your close friend outside'.*
- 2.** To make this want more concrete, it might go: *'I want you to ask me questions to help me draw out my position some, instead of coming on with your disagreements so hard and fast'.*
- 3.** Less fuzzy would be something like this: *'I notice that several people say what they think in half - apologetic kind of way, for instance, Sue, you said something like, Well, this may be really crazy but' I think that it's really a way of protecting yourself, and I think it stifles debate, so I wish people would just spit out what they think and save the apologies'.*
- 4.** This is a negative and fuzzy want. Try something like, *'Sharon, I have a hunch that you had such a negative reaction to Peggy's class analysis of doctors because you're in med school - I'd like you to tell me if my hunch is right'.*
- 5.** An action - want should say what you want the person to *do*, not what you want them to feel. How about something like: *'I want you to try it first, and then ask for help if you get stuck, instead of saying you can't do it before you try'.*
- 6.** More direct would be: *'I'd like some help with the collating, Barbara'.*
- 7.** What would *'being more organized'* require in terms of a concrete *action*? Better would be something like: *'I'm going to buy a date book and set up a filing system this week'.*
- 8.** Notice the many possible meanings for the word listen: *'I want you to be quiet while I talk'*, or *'I want you to run back what you heard me say so I know you got it'*, or, *'I want you to enthusiastically agree to everything I say'.*

How To Do Criticism: GUIDELINE FOUR – Explaining the Purpose

Perhaps the most important part of a criticism is the political motivation, the explanation of *why* I think someone should change. There are two contrasting ways of getting people to change: The first reflects the donkey theory - people won't change unless hit by a stick and bribed with a carrot. All of capitalist society is organized on the principle of economic compulsion: do for The Man or starve on welfare. We're also familiar with *indirect* economic compulsion:

Do what I say or I'll lower your grade. Act right or we'll give you a dishonorable discharge'. A bit more subtle is psychological compulsion, where labels are used as bludgeons. If you don't enthusiastically go along with us, you are:

(a) culturally deprived, (b) emotionally disturbed, (c) socially dangerous, (d) the unfortunate product of a familial fracture.

Then, too, we're all familiar with the good old - fashioned guilt trip: *'Do it my way or I'll go eat a worm, and then won't you be sorry!'* Of course the flip side of compulsion is bribery: *'Do X and you'll get Y'*. This kind of motivation is so widespread because it is all that's available to the ruling class, which can only keep us producing profit for them through the assiduous application of threats and bribes. This set - up extends into every area of our lives, degrading our relationships in the most intimate ways. The logic of this system brings us everything from the father who pays his ten - year - old son two dollars for every A and one dollar for every B, to the grandmother who uses the threat of having a *'nervous breakdown'* to keep her family in line.

The alternative relies not on punishment or bribery, but on education, education based on the dialectical conception that the process of change begins primarily with internal commitment. It relies on educating others about the *purpose* for the desired change, and it can only be used among the people, the persons with whom our long - term interests do not conflict. When I'm operating from this dialectical understanding, I want the other persons to change not out of fear or obligation, but because they see how the change will benefit the whole - the whole group, the whole organization, the whole working class - themselves included.

I remember one experience that showed me the sharp contrast between the two kinds of motivation. Several years ago, when the women's liberation movement had just hit St. Louis, I lived in a large collective household of women and men. After some months of struggle, we had nearly overthrown the old sexist division of labor, where the women did all the cleaning, because *'dirt bothers you women more'*, and all the cooking, because *'You know how to cook. Besides, we men don't ask you to change the oil in the car (once every*

four months), *do we?*' Tim, however, was a diehard. He consistently skated through the least amount of housework possible and would seldom even bother to answer the constantly ringing telephone in our busy movement household.

Our reaction was a textbook case of what shouldn't happen. Part of the problem was our own liberalism - after two or three confrontations had failed, we reverted to the cold shoulder method of miseducation. The other problem was our inability to explain our purpose to Tim in a good way: when we did confront him, our explanations were abstract and moralistic - *'You're being really piggy, Tim. Don't you see how selfish you are?'*

We were at our wit's end with Tim when a couple of old friends came into town. In desperation, we asked one of them, Abigail, to talk to him. She and Tim spent the better part of a Sunday afternoon talking. The change in Tim's behavior, while by no means miraculous, was definitely a breakthrough. He made a self - criticism at a house meeting and was noticeably more visible during Saturday morning clean - up. He asked for cooking lessons and developed an entire repertoire of variations on rice - veggy casserole. A new atmosphere arose where we were able to do further criticism in a much more open way. Before Abigail left, we asked her about their conversation.

First, she said, we had to make an agreement that we were both willing to do some criticism. I told him that you had asked me to talk to him, and he really tensed up. But then I saw (because it was true) that I wasn't packing any guns: I *did* want him to make some changes, but I wasn't into punishing him into it. I told him I'd seen enough struggles where comrades tried to terrorize each other into changing, and I really *knew* that guilt - tripping only leads to superficial changes. I'm really glad we got our agreement straight to start with, because the content got pretty heavy.

We talked about the way society runs by everybody's labor. Tim has been conscious of exploitation on the job for a long time, but he hadn't thought about how housework was necessary labor, too. I told him it was no accident that he'd never been taught that unpaid labor is *hidden* labor under capitalism. It was really clear that he didn't want to be part of exploiting other people, no way. We also talked about how *he'd* be helped by changing. I told him that he was losing something very important by staying outside of the housework there's a lot of team feeling that comes from working together, and he was just plain missing out on it. He brought up the flip side of the coin, which is that a sex-typed division of labor forces men into roles, too he talked about how he hates having to be the heavy who always ends up hassling with the landlord. And I ran down how sex - typing in housework is the other side of holding women back in theoretical and political growth as revolutionaries.

The last thing we discussed was his resentment of how the criticism had come at him. He really resented the way he was made out to be a bad guy and isolated he's going to make a criticism about that. By the end of our talk, I suggested something for him to read that explains the sexual division of labor under capitalism. Yesterday he came up to me and said that having that kind of analysis makes scrubbing the toilet bowl seem a lot less odious!

There were two lessons I drew from this incident. First is the importance of making sure that both sides enter into the criticism with the understanding that change should be based on a grasp of the purpose, rather than on fear or guilt. When I'm the criticizer, I need to check my own head to make sure I can honestly sign up for this agreement. The acid test comes when I ask myself: *'How would I respond if the brother or sister doesn't change?'* If sweet revenge comes immediately to mind, then I've got some changing to do first on my *own* attitude. The second lesson is the importance of giving the criticism in a way that politically educates, that shows the class origins and consequences behind the different kinds of behavior. Abigail didn't do this with an abstraction or with a character judgment (*'You're petit - bourgeois, Tim'*). She explained it in a concrete way that Tim could really get hold of.

We said that change should be voluntary. This does not mean that change should be sought through the pretty - please - with - a - cherry - on - top style of criticism. If a comrade is doing something that is harmful to other people and to the revolution, it is only right to use certain kinds of force if patient talk has not worked. The crucial difference is whether pressure is used to *punish* or to *educate and protect*. Here's an example that shows the distinction. Say a committee of workers is engaged in union organizing and has developed security guidelines to protect the jobs of inside organizers and the success of the membership drive. One person breaks the guidelines two times during loose conversations with friends - nothing malicious, but dangerous nonetheless. If criticism does not solve the problem once and for all, at some point the committee might legitimately decide to drop this individual not as a punishment, but to protect the drive. Although this action would involve a certain kind of coercion, it would be consistent with the spirit and goals of criticism and self - criticism.

Here again, it's important to emphasize that I myself need to be politically educated in order to explain the political purpose behind my criticism. Abigail was able to explain her point to Tim because she had an analysis of how unpaid household labor fit into their shared Marxist perspective. While *how* we criticize is important, the primary thing is knowing *what* to criticize, what purpose to put forward. Again, to use these guidelines with political content requires careful study of our whole body of revolutionary theory in a collective setting.

Summary of Four Guidelines for Giving Criticism

The first four guidelines help me criticize in a way that is most likely to educate; they help me avoid vague, subjective, and punitive thinking. The formula below shows one way of putting these guidelines together to communicate observations, feelings, wants, and purpose. Some people who are learning the guidelines joke about writing this formula on the inside of their arm before making a criticism. It should be clear, though, that this formula is only a mechanical scheme. Common sense and practice will tell you which components of a criticism are important at any one time. Again, the formula: When you do **A** (*observation*), I feel **B** (*emotion*), and I want you to do **C** (*action - want*), because of **D** (*purpose*).

How To Receive Criticism: GUIDELINE FIVE - Paraphrasing

Sun Wu Tzu said in discussing military science, *'Know the enemy and know yourself, and you can fight a hundred battles with no danger of defeat'*. Wei Ching of the Tang Dynasty also understood the error of one - sidedness when he said:

'Listen to both sides and you will be enlightened, heed only one side and you will be benighted. But our comrades often look at problems one - sidedly, and so they often run into snags. What [people] say may or may not be correct; after hearing it, we must analyze it. We must heed the correct views and act upon them. Listen also to the mistaken view - it is wrong not to listen to them at all. Such views, however, are not to be acted upon but to be criticized'

(Mao Tse Tung)

In criticism and self - criticism, clarifying my statement of the problem is only part of the work. Unless the criticism is accurately received and understood, the communication is not complete. This fifth skill focuses on how to *receive* criticism in better ways.

Unless people can hear my criticism correctly, it can be very risky to give the criticism at all. Once, for instance, I said in a meeting, *'Excuse me, Diane, but I'm getting antsy with the length of time you're taking to make that point, and I'd like you to wrap it up so we can get through the agenda'*. She replied with shock and hurt, *'Oh, I know I'm a bigmouth, everybody tells me that. I'm sorry to bore you'*. Although I *hadn't* called Diane a bigmouth, if that's the way she *heard* my message, our working relationship is in trouble. This is why I want people to know how to paraphrase, or check out what they heard by saying back the essence of it in their own words. If Diane had used the skill of paraphrasing, she would have *suspended her own reaction* until she had confirmed the accuracy of what she heard. She might have run back my criticism in this way: *'So you're anxious to get through the agenda and you want me to shorten it up, yes?'* This would assure both of us that my criticism was getting through the way I intended it. It would also give me a chance to correct any misinterpretation that might have occurred.

Paraphrasing can also be critical in tense political situations. Two opposing caucuses in a revolutionary organization had been at loggerheads for months. The caucuses set up a meeting of representatives from each group to try to reconcile their differences, in the hope that they could avoid pulling the organization apart. At the meeting, distrust ran high. Caucus A seemed to have on filtered glasses - everything that Caucus B said was neatly colored to

match their pre - formed stereotypes. Here's an excerpt of the dialogue, showing how paraphrasing was used in the situation:

Spokesperson from A: *'And another disagreement we have with you is that you people are against class struggle'.*

An angry, disgusted groan goes up from Caucus B. Instead of attacking, though, one person from Caucus B asked for a paraphrase:

'I'm getting really frustrated with the way you're hearing our position. I'd like you to run back what you think we're saying, so we can see if you're reading us right'.

A: *'You said that it was important to support struggles in the Third World, and that an anti - imperialist strategy was key. You think we should be nothing more than a support organization for Third World struggles. That position is objectively against class struggle in the U.S.'.*

B: *'I'm glad you ran that back, because nobody in our caucus thinks what you just said. Let me restate our position so we can clear this up'.*

Slowly, painstakingly, the misunderstanding was ironed out. Once the false differences had been cleared up, the two groups were able to start sorting out their real differences.

Paraphrasing is very different from mechanically parroting what the speaker said, and it should not be done indiscriminately. I paraphrase only under these conditions:

- 1.** When the other person asks me for assurance that I have understood her message, as when someone ends her statement by saying: *'Do you know what I mean?'*
- 2.** When I'm unclear about what the other person had in mind, and want to check my own understanding of it.
- 3.** When things are starting to get rushed and confused, and I want to slow things down.

It is also important to see, the difference between *paraphrasing* and *agreeing*.

If I restate a message to see if I have heard it accurately, that does *not* mean that I'm going along with it. To refer to the example used earlier, Diane might first have paraphrased my impatience about how long she was talking and then come back with her own feelings and wants:

'Look, Vicki, I'm not completely clear on what I'm trying to say myself, but I want to try to say it out loud to help get it clear in my own head. It's really important to me to figure this out, so I want you to just sit tight for a few more minutes'.

Exercise on Guideline Five: Paraphrasing

Here is a list of clear messages that express some combination of observations, feelings, wants, and purpose statements. You might ask a friend to read the sentences out loud, and then you can paraphrase what you heard in your own words. This format may be helpful:

When I (we) do **A** (*observation*), do you feel **B** (*emotion*), and do you want me (us) to do **C** (*action - want*), because of **D** (*purpose*)?

In real life it is not likely that you'd jam all this information into one paraphrase. Luckily, if you miss something important, the other person will often times repeat what you left out until you show them that it registered. In the following example, Patty is receiving Gwen's criticism and has to paraphrase repeatedly before she picks up everything that Gwen wants to get across.

Gwen: *'Look, Patty, I'm angry that you didn't get the article in to Steve when you said you would. I'm afraid that the news will be outdated by the time the article gets to L.A., and all our work will have been wasted. I sure as blazes wish you'd say you' ll do something only if you're sure you can take care of it on time'.*

Patty: *'So you think the article may not be useful any more and you think I should clean up my act, right?' (Pat paraphrased the purpose and want, but missed the feeling).*

Gwen: *'Yeah, I was really blown away when Steve told me you got it to him just yesterday. Jane and I spent nearly two days on that article!' (Gwen reiterates her feeling and the observation).*

Patty: *'I can really see what a bummer that is, I can dig how you'd be angry about my getting it to him so late. (Patty finally shows that she hears how angry Gwen feels). Look, let me tell you what happened so we can iron this out'.*

Since the criticisms in the list below are pretty clear and concrete, this exercise will be easy for you. The only trick is to avoid parroting, to make sure you paraphrase the message in your own words.

- 1.** I get irritated and rattled when you start talking before I finish my sentence. I want you to wait till I'm done before you start talking.
- 2.** We're confused and critical about the fact that our collective didn't get an invitation to send observers to your organization's national conference. We'd like to know what your reasons were.
- 3.** I'm really pissed off that you didn't show up with the leaflets this morning. Three people got up at 5:30 to do leaf letting before work, and we were all really burned. Besides, the reliability of the support committee is very important to build up trust with the people inside the plant. What happened?
- 4.** I'm really mistrustful cause I've noticed that you criticize the men on *our* side of the split for sexism, but you don't have any criticism for the men in *your* camp. I'd like you to tell me if my hunch is right that your criticism is directed more at our political disagreements than it is toward actual sexist behavior. If that's the case, I think it's really unprincipled, and you people should retract the criticism.

How To Receive Criticism: GUIDELINE SIX – Empathizing

It would be great if everyone would give criticisms in the clear, concrete way we've been talking about. But since we've all been drilled in categorical and static thinking, we often have to deal with criticisms that come at us as sharply defined as a cotton ball and as friendly as a meat cleaver. As revolutionaries, it is our responsibility to hear and learn from all criticisms, no matter what form they come in. The goal is to learn how to receive any criticism so that we can learn from it - without counterattacking defensively, and without getting wiped out. Empathizing is a way to receive vague or one-sided criticism as a statement of the criticizer's observations, feelings, wants, and purpose. Using this guideline prevents me from taking criticisms as a character judgment of me, and allows me to use and learn from any criticism that comes my way.

For example, several months ago, during an evaluation period at the end of a class session, one student, Ellen, made a strong criticism of me as a teacher. *'We're studying about alienation in this class'*, she said, her voice strained, and her face flushing red. *'Well, I'm alienated all right! You keep pushing us on, telling us we have to hurry through things - we never really have time to finish one thing out!'* I felt a cold flash of fear at the thought of looking bad in front of the whole group; and I was even more uneasy because there was a visitor in class that day, someone I respected and wanted to impress. In the few seconds of silence after Ellen's outburst, a flood of thoughts and feelings raced through my head. Part of me wanted to launch a heated defense, to do anything to preserve my self - image. Somehow I managed to remind myself that I could receive Ellen's message in a way that could help me learn. With an effort, I blocked my habitual defensive impulse and haltingly tried to hear her criticism in terms of observations, feelings, wants, and purpose. So when I interrupt the small group discussions, Ellen, and say I want us to move on, it's really frustrating because it cuts off the discussion, and you'd like me to ah, uh ... you would like me to ask whether people need more time before I push on? Is that it?' The balloon of fear inside me collapsed. Hearing Ellen's criticism in this way made the whole issue seem less enormous. I had disciplined myself to see that the issue did not center around some abstract and static judgment of whether I was a *'good teacher'* or a *'bad teacher'*, or about whether it was Ellen or I who would come out looking better; the issue was about some *concrete thing that I was doing* that Ellen wanted me to understand and change.

In this spirit, the dialogue continued. I told Ellen where I agreed with her, and criticized myself for not making it clear that I was very open to letting people alter the agenda. I also offered some criticism, telling her that I had real trouble with the way she gave her criticism and that I disagreed with her

perception that my suggestions had been orders. We also discussed the social root of the misunderstanding, which is the negative experience all of us have had with teacher - student roles in capitalist society. I saw that I should have anticipated the problem, and initiated a discussion of how I saw our working relationship as being different than the usual set - up, and how we could handle the real coercive power the school had handed me in my role as grade-giver. The discussion soon included the whole class, and produced some new understandings and ideas that would involve more people in exercising leadership during our sessions. We had succeeded in doing our criticism in a cooperative rather than a competitive way.

Empathizing was a key factor in the way the incident turned out. By disciplining myself to empathize, I was able to stop my knee - jerk defensive reaction. Empathizing also gave the students a chance to see that I really wanted to *hear* the criticism so I could learn from it. This counteracts a punitive dynamic; when someone feels heard, they're less likely to escalate an attack, they're more likely to listen in return.

In a situation where there had been more trust and familiarity between me and my critic, I might have been less forbearing about the almost inflammatory way Ellen delivered her criticism. If a long - time comrade had popped off at me the way Ellen did, I might well have asked her to back off a little before we went any further:

'Whoa, hold on just a minute. Slow down a second and give me an example of what you mean so I can get hold of your criticism. I'm having a hard time with how you're coming on'.

Empathizing has nothing in common with allowing yourself to get dumped on.

Often when I present the idea of empathizing, people say: *'Yeah, I can see how that would be useful for making sure I hear the criticism, but won't people think I'm trying to patronize them or run a psychological game on them?'* How people respond to empathizing depends a lot on the *intention* the empathizer brings to the situation. If I convey that I'm genuinely interested in understanding the criticism, I usually find that people are *grateful* to have someone really listening. Of course, since I'm *guessing* to try to fill out an unclear criticism, there's always the possibility that I'll guess wrong. If I come across as though I know better than the other person what she thinks, she would be fully justified in accusing me of manipulation. My tone of voice is important here, in making it clear that I am just *checking* out my understanding for their verification. (Notice the question mark at the end of my guesses!) And clearly, it's important to avoid deliberately mishearing someone as a way of mocking their criticism; I would have been doing this if I had said to Ellen in a

sarcastic tone, *'So in other words you think I should abdicate all leadership here and just let it flow, huh?'*

When I was first leaning to empathize, it often seemed agonizingly hard for me to hold my own response long enough to see if I had even heard the original criticism. My survival training was so engrained that I automatically mobilized in self - defense, even when my rational mind knew that I was among people who had no real interest in hurting me. Then, too, just listening somehow seemed like giving ground - if I listened, wouldn't they mistake that for weakness? Retraining myself to empathize was (and is) a discipline, no doubt about it. Then too, if I *did* manage to wait, I would halt and stutter while I tried to get the other person's criticism formulated in my own words. But if anyone accused me of sounding unnatural in this effort, I was prepared to give them Marshall Rosenberg's famous line:

'Look buddy, it's your choice: either you can bear with me while I try to listen to you, or we can try it in my natural style - I'll just call you a horse's ass and we'll be done with it'.

Usually, Marshall reports, people choose the first alternative, finding new reserves of patience deep within.

What To Do When The Going Gets Rough: GUIDELINE SEVEN – Preventing and Handling Defensiveness

Of course, before we face the problem of how to give a criticism most constructively, we have to make the commitment to give the criticism in the first place. All of us know that in the short run it is most comfortable to hold our criticisms or vent them indirectly as gossip. Sending the criticism right to the mark is often scary, no doubt about it. At the same time, all of us know the long-term problems that crop up when conflict goes underground. The original problems persist, tensions mount, and people retreat into themselves or to the small group closest to them. The result is illness or death for the organization or relationship – death by apathy (the fuck - it attitude), or death by blow - up, the grand explosion. Mao has written the definitive three-page article on this topic, '*Combat Liberalism*'. Read it and study it collectively for the best preventive or remedial treatment I know.

Here I'll take up only one aspect of combating liberalism. What's the connection between fighting liberalism and dealing with defensiveness? In my view, when a person responds defensively to criticism (whether through a hot come - back, sarcasm, or avoidance), she teaches her comrades that giving criticism is *dangerous*, thus pushing them back into liberalism (avoidance of conflict). So, disciplining ourselves against reacting defensively, as well as learning how to handle defensiveness from others, are two ways to combat liberalism.

This section will focus on things you can do on the spot to prevent and handle the defensiveness that sometimes comes up, no matter how constructive the criticism. You can use these suggestions either with someone who has not been politically educated about the negative effects of defensiveness, or with someone who *has* been educated but blew it. Before we get into the practical ideas, though, let's take a look at the social origins of defensiveness.

From our earliest days we have been subjected to name - calling and labeling. This one is '*gifted*', that one is a '*slow learner*' (dummy); this one is '*cute*', that one is '*plain*'. The sorting process relentlessly divides us into winners and losers, until we are trained to obediently assume our places in the class structure. This kind of '*criticism*' really *was* dangerous; it was used as a weapon against us. It's no wonder, then, that we come to *expect* each other to categorize and call names, and often hear personal attacks even when they aren't intended.

Often, too, people will hear *wants* as demands, and bitterly resent what they hear as an order. In my class with Ellen, you'll recall, the students assumed that my wants were an order. This confusion comes from our long experience with dominant - submissive relationships - if the boss asks, '*Do you want to*

do this piece of work?' you know the only answer he wants. So, in reacting against class - based authoritarian social relations, we may begin to confuse any kind of assertiveness or leadership with domination by an oppressor.

Unless this problem is confronted and understood, people may try to avoid the conflict by abdicating all leadership, as when the chairperson of a meeting falls all over herself trying to prove that she is not *'too pushy'*. Yet when leadership spends all its energy walking on eggs to be *'diplomatic'*, our political work grinds to a halt. Chair: *'I think I might like us to maybe do X, if that's OK with everyone, but on the other hand, we could do Y, and I don't know, maybe it's not a very good idea, what do you think?'*

A third common misinterpretation comes when people hear each other's wants as guilt - trips or obligations. For example:

She says: *'I'd like a hug'*.

He thinks: *'Damn, she's accusing me of neglecting her! I suppose I have to give her a hug, then, even if I'm not in the mood'*.

He says (variation one): *'Oh, all right then' (sigh)*.

He says (variation two): *'Why are you so clingy and dependent?'* If she doesn't know about this dynamic, she may be very confused about what's hit her.

This problem also arises from our experiences with powerlessness. Many people in subordinate positions, and especially white women, in my experience, are forbidden to exercise power directly. They are forced to resort to a repertoire which includes guilt - tripping, hint - dropping, and emotional blackmail. Life with people who have so adapted to their powerlessness can be a hellish game of second - guessing. People who have had this game played in their vicinity are often gun - shy – and any want, no matter how straight - forwardly given, can look like a guilt - trip in disguise.

To summarize: a lot of defensiveness originates not in resistance to the *content* of the criticism, but rather in resistance to what the receiver hears as the *intent* behind the criticism. When someone believes that a criticism is really a personal attack, demand, threat, or guilt - trip, defensiveness comes to the fore.

On the other hand, some defensiveness is rooted not in misinterpretation, but rather in self - interest. If I'm afraid I have something to lose by changing, I may fall into individualistic self - protection rather than wanting to really understand what is best for the whole. This kind of defensiveness can only be

overcome through political education, coming to see the reasons for guarding the interests of the people above my own individual comfort.

For right now, we will focus on some practical ideas for preventing and handling the kind of defensiveness that comes from misinterpretation of the criticizer's intentions.

Preventing Defensiveness. If I have reason to believe that a defensive reaction is likely, I can *preface* my criticism with words that try to head the problem off. There are at least two ways to do this.

First, I can ask in advance for the other person to run back or paraphrase what they hear, which will give me a chance to make sure that they have heard my criticism as I intended it. For instance, I might say: *'I have some criticism that I'm a little tense about giving you. Just to make sure that I'm getting it across the way I want to, I'd like you to say back what you heard when I'm finished'*.

Second, I can disclaim the misinterpretation that I predict is most likely: *'I've got some pretty heavy criticisms of the newspaper, Rosa, but I want you to know that they're friendly criticisms; I intend for my feedback to help strengthen the paper'*.

Identifying a Defensive Reaction. If I'm pretty sure that someone has received my criticism inaccurately, it's important to check this out: *'My hunch is that my criticism came across to you as a put - down - is that right?'* The answer will give me an idea where the defensiveness is coming from, the question also encourages me to examine my own motives in giving the criticism. Was I trying to put the other person down, was I giving an order or running a guilt - trip, or was I firm in my intention to protect and educate?

Handling Defensiveness. If someone *did* hear my message inaccurately, I often want to empathize with how they feel and what they want *before* going on to correct them. If someone has a strong reaction to what they think was a put - down, my rational protests - *'Oh, no, you didn't understand! That's not what I meant!'* - will not always get us back on the same track. So sometimes I begin by acknowledging the reaction they showed when they heard me: *'Sounds like you're angry and maybe hurt about my criticism. Are you wanting me to understand the reasons for what you did?'* Only when they answer are the channels clear for me to backtrack and clear up the original misperception. If a person has flipped into a defensive reaction, empathizing can be important simply to slow things down.

Once I know that someone has heard my criticism inaccurately, how can I get things back on the track? One way is to ask the person to paraphrase what

they heard me say: *'I'm still upset that I'm not getting through to you right, so I'd like you to run back what you heard me say'*. If there's a discrepancy between what I said and what they heard, I can point out the difference: *'Bob, I'm hoping that you can see the difference between my saying I think you took the wrong position last night and my saying you were deliberately trying to be opportunistic. Can you see the difference there?'* Particularly if I'm in a long - term or high - stake relationship with someone, I may want to stick with this point until I'm completely satisfied that they got my message right.

I may also choose to ask the person to tell me how I might express my position in a way that's less likely to provoke a defensive reaction next time:

'Jan, I'd like you to see the bind we're in if every time I give you a criticism it comes across as a personal put - down. I want you to give me some ideas about what either of us could do differently so we can break through this problem'.

Occasionally I run into a situation, someone consistently misunderstands what I say. They've got me so stereotyped that it seems there's nothing I can say that won't fit into their stereotype of me and my politics. (Some of the cues that warn me I've been pigeonholed are these expressions: *'You people always ! You never ! There you go again ! You're just like all the rest of those (women, men)!'*

In these cases, I may ask the person or group for a way out of the box:

'Look, I'm getting really frustrated that you attribute all my political positions to the fact that I'm working with X organization, because I've already told you that I disagree with them on points a, b, and c. What do we need to do to break out of this so that we can talk politics in some kind of good way?'

Of course no matter how well I give criticism, and no matter how hard I work to deal with defensiveness or to prevent it through political education, there are still situations where good criticism and self - criticism seem very unlikely to occur. One organization I know, for instance, holds the political line that *it* is the vanguard party and that all other leftists are fake leftists. Conducting good mutual criticism with such an organization is probably impossible. At some point, I may reach the decision that the basis of unity between me and another person or organization is not strong enough to make it worth the struggle. In such a situation, the best advice I know is this: *'If you can't stop the train, get out of the way'*.

What To Do When The Going Gets Rough: Exercises on Guideline Seven: Preventing and Handling Defensiveness

1. On preventing defensiveness: Think of a negative or positive criticism you've been postponing giving to someone because you're afraid of how they might take it. Try jotting down how you might preface your message to prevent a possible distortion.

2. On handling defensiveness when it's occurred: Using the examples below, or your own experience, think through what you might say to handle a defensive reaction.

(1) You are Person A. Person B hears a demand.

A: *'When people get to the meeting late, we lose a lot of time. I'd like to propose that we all get here 15 minutes early next time.'*

B: (sarcastically) *'Yes, teacher.'*

(2) You are A. B hears you laying on an obligation.

A: *'I'm really overextended in the rest of my life. Would you be willing to get the mailing done, yourself, B, without my working on it?'*

B: *'Wow, I don't know. I'm really busy, too (sigh). Oh well, it has to be done, I suppose I don't have any choice.'*

In Part Two of this handbook, we have looked at seven guidelines for giving and receiving criticism in the most constructive ways. Now, in Part Three, we'll go on to look at the history and evolution of criticism and self - criticism in the world revolutionary movement.

Part Three:

History of Criticism and Self - Criticism

Criticism has been used by revolutionaries as long as there has been a Marxist movement. The tool was developed most deeply, though, in the Chinese Revolution. Originally used only inside the Chinese Communist Party and the Red Army, criticism was later popularized for the use by the whole population.

The Chinese placed such great emphasis on criticism because Marxist-Leninist theory told them that to defeat imperialism completely, it would not be enough to revolutionize the economic system and overthrow the repressive political system; it would be necessary, at the same time, and over many years, to establish the dominance of working-class ideology in all social relations. They saw that class struggle went on not only between the working people and the ruling classes, but also between working people as individuals. This was because China's small - scale peasant economy, as well as centuries of living in a class society, had caused working people to internalize many ideas that would preserve old feudal and colonialist power relationships.

Male supremacy, contempt for manual labor, blind obedience to authority, and superstition were heavy burdens on the backs of the Chinese people as they began their national democratic and socialist revolutions. Until the deep divisions inherited from the old society - divisions between town and country, mental and manual work, wage labor in the market and unpaid labor in the home, planners and workers - were thoroughly erased over the decades. The Chinese knew that there still existed a material basis for a privileged minority to reestablish domination over the rest. Criticism gave people a way of distinguishing between old ideas which perpetuated class relationships and new ideas that served the revolution, ideas that provided a framework for struggling through differences to establish higher levels of unity.

Criticism was used from the earliest days of the Chinese Communist Party, sometimes taking the form of Rectification Campaigns, periods of intense study and debate within the Party which sometimes lasted more than three years. One such campaign was launched in 1927, after a series of political errors had resulted in Chiang Kai - Shek's massacre of tens of thousands of Communists, workers, and peasants. The bloodied remnants of the Communist Party gathered to do a thorough self - criticism of their political line. In the process, the erroneous idea of basing the revolution chiefly on the urban proletariat was thoroughly defeated, and Mao's line of seeing the peasantry as the Chinese revolution's main force was consolidated. (Although China was only 1 percent working class and over 85 percent peasants, the rigid dogmatism of the Chen Tu - hsiu faction of the Party had prevented them from seeing how Marxism should be creatively applied in Chinese

circumstances). During the course of the debate, the policy of confiscating the holdings of middle peasants and merchants (which had only served to drive these intermediate forces into the arms of the enemy) was exposed as an error. Finally, the Party summed up the bitter lesson they had learned about making political alliances.

Another Rectification Campaign focused on principles of unity. By eagerly making an alliance with Chiang's Kuomintang Party (KMT) in order to resist the Japanese invaders, the Chinese Communist Party gave up much of its power and was helpless when the KMT turned its guns against its former Communist allies. Ten years later Mao wrote '*Combat Liberalism*', to remind people of the extreme danger of sacrificing political principles out of the desire for unity.

Later Rectification Campaigns focused on methods of work. Just before the Communist Party gained control of much of the country in the early 1940's, Mao led a movement to '*clean up and shake up*' a top - heavy Party bureaucracy that was starting to stifle the elected mass organizations in the liberated zones of China. Later Mao advocated the policy of '*opening wide*', that is, asking non - party members to freely criticize Party cadres. To open wide means to let all people express their opinions freely, so that they dare to speak, dare to criticize, and dare to debate; it means not being afraid of wrong views and anything erroneous; it means to encourage argument and criticism among people having different views, allowing freedom both for criticism and counter - criticism; it means not suppressing wrong views but convincing people by reasoning with them'. [\[15\]](#) Mao invited a constant fight against bureaucracy and ossification when he proclaimed, '*Anyone, no matter who, may criticize us because we serve the people*'.

A second form of criticism was ideological education campaigns in the Red Army. The soldiers alternated between periods of fighting and periods of criticism and self - criticism. When the guerrillas encamped, everything was thrown open for debate. '*Not only were battles and campaigns discussed*', writes Han Su in her biography of Mao, '*but the individual conduct of any commander or fighter could be criticized. The inarticulate peasant thus learned to think, to express himself; he became responsible, valuing his own worth as a member of a great revolutionary company*'. [\[16\]](#)

Because the Party was composed of the most dedicated and politically developed people in the country, and because of its principles of organization, the Chinese Communist Party could use criticism in the very deepest ways. Democratic centralism meant that once a policy was decided, it would be carried out in a thorough and disciplined way, thus insuring a real basis for evaluation. It also meant that opinions and experiences from all over China could be gathered and synthesized by the central leadership and sent back to

the lower levels for full democratic discussion and correction. by the time the Party had determined a policy or summed up its practice for a certain period, the ideas and experiences of thousands of people had been synchronized into the richest criticism possible.

Whenever the party worked, the masses of workers and peasants would receive training in criticism. Often villagers would be asked to criticize the Party members working in their locale. In an unprecedented challenge to feudal notions of authority, mass meetings were set up where the villagers would conduct thorough investigations into the revolutionary practice of each Party cadre. In *'passing the gate'*, each Party member was helped to identify and overcome her shortcomings, and received invaluable feedback from the people she served and led.

Over the years, criticism was spread more and more widely as a method for resolving every kind of contradiction among the people. While the Communists understood that conflicts between the people and the class enemies of the people could not usually be resolved without force, they classified 95 percent of the Chinese population as having a fundamental common interest in revolution. Among the people, Mao emphasized that struggle should be carried out through the democratic method of patient persuasion, and out of a *'wholehearted desire to protect and educate'*. After the consolidation of power in 1949 the Chinese revolutionaries used criticism to resolve their differences with the remaining capitalist elements in China and to reform common criminals and counter - revolutionaries.

Enormous ideological education movements, involving daily political study sessions for millions of people, popularized the principles of Marxism - Leninism among the masses, so that they could use criticism themselves, learning to identify the roots of errors in class attitudes. William Hinton gives us this account of a criticism session in a mutual - aid team in the countryside. Li, an intellectual, began with a self - criticism:

'I quarreled with Lao Chang the other day. I thought, he is always getting in the way. He is so slow. So I spoke to him sharply. That was wrong. I should have patiently explained [how to use the tractor] instead. My trouble is individualism.

'Yes'. Said a peasant. 'Sometimes you act just like a landlord. One would think you thought you were better than other people. You must realize that your education was made possible by other's hard work. For every one who studies, hundreds must sweat in the fields. There is no particular merit to being a student. If things had been the other way around anyone might have done the same as you. So you should really think about it. It has to do with your [class] outlook'. [\[17\]](#)

A second example of the use of criticism and self - criticism among the people was told by Barbara Ehrenreich, who visited the dockworkers of Shanghai during a recent upsurge of cultural revolution in China:

[Our party] met with both sides - the chairman of the dock's revolutionary committee (who had been a target of criticism) and a group of rank - and - file representatives including Fang Tien Rin, the young worker who has written the first big - character poster of the rebellion. If there had been any hard feelings before, they were no longer in evidence. Everyone from the chairman on down, was impatient to tell his or her part of the story. Fang ran down the grievances which had emerged from the workers' early meetings to criticize Lin Piao and Confucius: For a period before the Movement to Criticize Lin Piao and Confucius began, the leadership [of the docks] concentrated all its efforts on managing production to the neglect of doing political and ideological work among the workers. The leadership was only interested in loading and unloading freighters and in tonnage, while forgetting to grasp the most important thing. We criticized the leadership for caring about timetables of ships instead of raising the red banner, which means the Party's basic line.

I will give you an example. Some of the leaders resorted to material incentives to speed up production. They did this in a disguised form. [All overt material incentives had been eliminated during the Cultural Revolution.] They encouraged workers to work faster so that if you finished your work you could just go home - no matter what time it was. They did not bring into full play the workers' enthusiasm for building socialism.

Another example: some leaders praised or rewarded in one way or another workers who fulfilled their quotas on schedule, no matter how they filled it, so that some workers just neglected the [safety] rules. So that, in actual fact, these leaders did not care for the safety of the masses. Also some leaders shut themselves up indoors, making plans instead of consulting the masses.

We think that we longshoremen are the masters of the dock. It's our duty to keep the leaders on the correct line and make sure we advance along the revolutionary path. So we put up posters saying '*Be masters of the Dock, not Slaves of the Tonnage*'.

There were three points in the [first] poster:

(1) On the '*Two Different Reliances*': Whether you rely on Marxist - Leninist and Mao Tse - tung Thought in running the enterprise or whether you rely on material incentives.

(2) On the *'Two Different Commands'*: Do you put politics or production in command? Which comes first?

(3) On the *'Two Different Points of Departure'*: Whether you proceed from seeing your country as a whole or whether you proceed from departmentalism.

Fang's initial poster *'hit the nail on the head'*, as he put it. In the ensuing months the workers held *'more than 200 mass rallies and medium - sized meetings'* and produced over 3,500 posters.

We Americans were staggered enough by the idea of workers rebelling against a policy of letting people get off work early. The dynamics of the *'struggle'* which followed the first posters were, if anything, stranger yet. Had the dock workers staged a work stoppage to get their way? No, the workers explained, *'our work is building socialism'*, and increased production is the ultimate goal of the workers too. Had Fang been afraid of being fired after he put up the first big - character poster? (The dockworkers thought this question was funny). Fang explained with a patient smile:

'Ours is a socialist country. The people are the masters. I am not working for the chairman [of the dock's revolutionary committee]. I am working for socialism and to serve the people, so the question of being fired never arose. The chairman used to be a laborer too. He is my leader, but also my class brother. If I have a shortcoming, he can help me out. If he has a shortcoming, I can seek him out and have a heart to heart talk with him. We are class brothers - how can we fight? How can the big brother fight with the little brother?' [\[18\]](#)

Criticism Around the World

Most Marxist revolutionary movements in the world have come to see criticism as an essential part of their liberation struggle. Amilcar Cabral of Guinea - Bissau underlined the importance of criticism in an address to fellow revolutionaries at the Tri - Continental Congress in Havana in 1966:

'Our agenda includes subjects whose meaning and importance are beyond question and which show a fundamental preoccupation with struggle. We note, however, that one form of struggle which we consider to be fundamental has not been explicitly mentioned in this program, although we are certain that it was present in the minds of those who drew up this program. We refer here to the struggle against our own weaknesses. Obviously, other cases differ from that of Guinea - Bissau, but our experience has shown us that in the general framework of our daily struggle this battle against ourselves - no matter what difficulties the enemy may create - is the most difficult of all, whether for the present or the future of our peoples. We are convinced that any national or social revolution which is not based on knowledge of this fundamental reality runs a grave risk of being condemned to failure'. [\[19\]](#)

In this spirit, SNCC brought criticism to the United States during the civil rights movement. Since then, the process has been taken up in many revolutionary organizations in our country. Although criticism can be used by anyone who accepts the basic principles of dialectical materialism, the depth of criticism possible depends upon the level of political unity of an organization or group, on its organizational structure, and on its experience in struggle.

List of Feeling Words

(This list is from Marshall Rosenberg's book *From Now On*, Community Psychological Consultants, 1740 Gulf Drive, St. Louis, 1976.)

Positive		Negative	
absorbed	groovy	afraid	hostile
adventurous	happy	aggravated	hot
affection	helpful	agitation	humdrum
alert	hopeful	alarm	hurt
alive	inquisitive	aloof	impatient
amazed	inspired	angry	indifferent
amused	intense	anguish	inert
animated	interested	animosity	infuriated
appreciation	intrigued	annoyance	insecure
astonished	invigorated	anxious	insensitive

blissful	involved	apathetic	intense
breathless	joyful	apprehensive	irate
buoyant	jubilant	aversion	irked
calm	keyed-up	bad	irritated
carefree	loving	beat	jealous
cheerful	mellow	bitter	jittery
comfortable	merry	blah	keyed-up
composed	mirthful	blown away	lassitude
concerned	moved	blue	lazy
confident	optimism	bored	let-down
contented	overwhelmed	burned up	lethargy
cool	overjoyed	breathless	listless
curious	peaceful	brokenhearted	lonely
dazzled	pleasant	chagrined	mad
delighted	proud	cold	mean
eager	quiet	concerned	melancholy
ecstatic	radiant	confused	miserable
elated	refreshed	cool	mopy
electrified	relieved	cross	pessimistic
encouraged	satisfied	credulous	pissed off
engrossed	secure	critical	provoked
enjoyment	sensitive	dejected	puzzled
enlivened	spellbound	depressed	rattled
enthusiastic	splendid	despair	reluctant
exalted	stimulated	despondent	repelled
excited	surprised	detached	resentful
exhilarated	tender	disappointed	restless
expansive	tenderness	discouraged	sad
expectant	thankful	disgruntled	scared
exuberant	thrilled	disgusted	sensitive
fascinated	touched	disheartened	shaky
free	tranquil	disinterested	shocked
friendly	trust	dislike	skeptical
fulfilled	warm	dismayed	sleepy
good-humored	wide-awake	displeased	sorrowful
grateful		dissatisfied	sorry
		distant	sour
		distressed	spiritless
		disturbed	startled
		down	surprised
		embittered	suspicion
		exasperated	tepid
		exhausted	terrified
		fatigued	thwarted
		fearful	tired

		fidgety	troubled
		flaky	uncomfortable
		forlorn	unconcerned
		frightened	uneasy
		frustrated	unglued
		furiously	unhappy
		gloomy	unnerved
		grief	unsteady
		grumpy	upset
		guilty	uptight
		hate	weary
		heavy	withdrawn
		helpless	woeful
		hesitant	worried
		horrified	wretched
		horrible	

Bibliography Suggested Readings on Criticism and Self - Criticism

This reading list includes many works about China and only one or two focusing on our own country. We can look forward to seeing more materials about the United States as our own struggle progresses and the practice of criticism and self-criticism takes deeper root among us. Nearly all the material is available from China Books, 2929 24th St., San Francisco, Ca. 94110. *Lessons from the Damned*, as well as some of the other books, is available at Modern Times Bookstore, 3800 17th St., San Francisco 94114. You can get David Hunter's long article in *Radical America* by writing to RA at 5 Upland Road, Cambridge, MA 02140.

Bettleheim, Charles, *Cultural Revolution and Industrial Organization in China*, Monthly Review Press, N.Y., 1974. Provides a good theoretical background for why the Chinese see criticism and self-criticism as a vital form of class struggle.

Chen Chin-Yuan, "Materialist Dialectics Helps Fighters Make Ideological Process," in the pamphlet *Mao Tse Tung's Thought is the Invincible Weapon*, Foreign Language Press, Peking, 1968. An excellent short article written for the People's Liberation Army.

"The Damned," *Lessons from the Damned, Class Struggle in the Black Community*, Times Change Press, N.Y., 1974. Class analysis and moving self-criticism by a collective of Black revolutionaries in New York.

Barbara Ehrenreich. "Democracy in China," *Monthly Review*, September 1974. On recent developments in the Cultural Revolution in China.

Han Suyin, *The Morning Deluge*, Little, Brown, 1972. A fine full-length biography of Mao, with much detail about all the forms of criticism and self-criticism used during the course of the Chinese Revolution through 1954.

Hinton, William, *Fanshen*, Vintage, 1966. See “Gate” in the index for sections on criticism. Gives a very good feel for the way revolution was carried out in one small village.

Hinton, William, *Iron Oxen: Documentary of Revolution in Chinese Farming*, Random House, N.Y., 1971. See especially Chapter 7, “I Accept Your Criticism,” but also Chapters 4, 14, and 17.

Footnotes

[1] *Political Thesis of the Puerto Rican Socialist Party* (New York: North American Congress on Latin America, 1975), p. 16.

[2] Mao Tse Tung, “On Dialectics” (unpublished). To my knowledge, this article has not been translated into an official English-language version. The quote is from a U.S. government translation shown me by a friend.

[3] Quote from Engels, in Robert Freedman, *Marxist Social Thought* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968), p. 31.

[4] William Hinton, *Iron Oxen* (New York: Random House, 1971), p. 21.

[5] “The Damned,” *Lessons from the Damned: Class Struggle in the Black Community* (New York: Times Change Press), p. 19.

[6] Allyn and Adele Rickett, *Prisoners of Liberation* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1973), pp. 291-92.

[7] David Hunter, “Organizing for Revolution in Viet Nam,” *Radical America*, September 1974, p. 100.

[8] Richard Sennet and Jonathan Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (New York: Vintage, 1973), p. 157.

[9] Robert Lane, *Political Ideology* (New York: Free Press, 1967).

[10] *Psychosources* (out of print), p. 108.

[11] Studs Terkel, *Working* (New York: Avon, 1975), pp. 398-99.